



# FACING THE HIDDEN DROP-OUT CHALLENGE IN ALBANIA

## Evaluation Report of Hidden drop-out Project

Piloted in basic education in 6 Prefectures of Albania  
(2001-2005)

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# Executive Summary

This report presents an account and evaluation of the Hidden Drop-Out project being implemented in Albania by the ‘Development of Education’ Association with the support of UNICEF and the backing of the Ministry of Education and Science. The initiative, which was launched in 2001 and piloted in five regions, set out to address the widespread but largely hidden phenomenon, whereby teachers engage in whole-class teaching, and consequently focusing solely on achieving students and ignoring the rest of the class. Such practices lead to a process of disengagement on the part of thousands of pupils in the first cycle at the basic school level, a process that leads to lack of achievement in learning core competencies, and eventually to the abandonment of the school.

The report describes the initiative, its design and piloting, the difficulties encountered in implementing it and how such problems were tackled or overcome, particularly with a view to ensuring its sustainability. The report also considers the extent to which the initiative proved to be relevant, effective and efficient, given the specificity of the overall socio-cultural and educational environment in which it was introduced, and the broader reform effort in the country.

The research methodology used in this review was largely qualitative, with the international consultant spending a two-week period in

Tirana, Korçë and Gjirokastër interviewing students, parents, teachers, Principals, deputy Principals, inspectors and Regional Education Directors, and observing classes which were being taught by teachers involved in the project, in schools that were piloting the approach. Interviews were also carried out with key staff from the DoE Association, UNICEF, the Ministry of Education and Science, and several NGO’s working in the field of education. Fieldwork was supplemented by desk research, as well as by preliminary data provided by a local consultant on the review team.

The report describes the key strategies used by the project in order to address the hidden drop-out phenomenon. Focusing on the first cycle of the basic school sector, i.e. Grades 1 to 4, and on two key curricular areas, i.e. Albanian language and Math, the initiative:

1. Trained teachers to design ‘Minimum Necessary Learning Objectives’ (MNLO’s) relating to the learning units for the Grade that they taught.
2. Helped teachers and Principals develop continuous assessment techniques, through the use of ‘mini-testing’, in order to constantly gauge the extent to which different pupils were mastering the MNLO’s, and to keep track of progress or lack of it.
3. Provided teachers with support in the goal of supporting at-risk pupils by initiating peer-learning programmes, and by engaging adult

volunteers from the community.

4. Trained Principals in a new approach to annual school planning, ensuring that the process was more open to partnership with teachers and the community, and more focused on learning achievement and learning outcomes.

The findings suggest that after four years of piloting, the project has had a positive impact on the pupils, schools and communities where it was implemented. It has also had a broader 'multiplier effect' on several other aspects of educational policy and practice in the country. The achievements and impact of the HDO initiative are detailed in Chapter Four of the report:

1. All qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that there were significant gains in learning achievement for pupils involved in the MNLO approach, and that consequently there were less 'hidden drop-outs' in the pilot schools.
2. The focus on learning outcomes led to a valuing of accountability and transparency, with schools and teachers being more open about the learning objectives that had to be reached, and more willing to facing up to their responsibilities when such objectives had not been attained.
3. Teachers became much more aware of the variegated needs of different learners in their classrooms, and organised their teaching, assessment and homework-setting practices in ways that took account of such difference.
4. Teacher evaluation practices on the part of Principals and inspectors became more supportive and formative in scope, leading teachers to becoming less insular and defensive, and more open to considering

alternative ways that could enhance effectiveness.

5. Teachers also found it easier to work together in the planning of MNLO's for their classes, and were prepared to move away from their classroom isolation in order to be pro-active members of a community of reflective practitioners.
6. Teachers and schools developed a heightened awareness of the fact that improved learning achievement for all required the support of other partners, including members of the student body (through peer learning programmes), and members of the wider community.

Despite such achievements, the evaluation report also highlights challenges that the project has to face up to in order to reach its goals more effectively. Two types of challenges are considered, those that are internal to the initiative itself, and those that related to the environment and context in which the initiative is embedded.

Endogenous challenges include:

1. The difficulties that teachers are finding to cater for the learning needs that are present in a heterogeneous classroom setting. Included in this challenge is the difficulty that teachers tend to face in designing MNLO's and mini-tests that, while respecting the principle that there are minimum competences that all students must master, nevertheless are articulated in such a way as to take into account of the different abilities in the classroom.
2. The propensity for competency approaches to present knowledge in fragmented ways rather than holistically, leading students to see lessons as a series of isolated, discrete sequences rather than as a part of a network

of connected knowledge structured around powerful ideas.

3. The need to develop a more integrated, whole-school approach to educational change, given that piloting in only the first four Grades and in only two curricular areas creates discontinuities of practice that are confusing for teachers and pupils alike.
4. The unintended consequences of the public display of the results of learning outcomes per Grade, and the comparison of these results within and across schools. Such practices tend to perpetrate the belief that achievement is unrelated to school intake, and that schools and teachers, on their own, can completely address injustices that have their origins elsewhere, i.e. in the way resources, power and life-chances are allocated and distributed in Albanian society.
5. The persistence of whole-class, traditional teaching styles among teachers who are involved with the HDO project, to the extent that few seem to be implementing child-centred, joyful forms of learning that are normally associated with primary schooling.
6. The negative impact that the term ‘hidden drop-out’ can have on pupils thus labelled, given that it reinforces a perception of oneself as a weak student, thus proving damaging to the process of the construction of their self-identity.

Other challenges—that are not the responsibility of those leading the initiative, but which nevertheless need to be addressed if the project is to be successful and replicated on a nationwide basis—include the following:

1. A more unequivocal and enthusiastic support of the project and MNLO approach on the part of the MoES, given that both the DoE Association and its partner UNICEF have

completed the phases for which they had responsibility for. While UNICEF will certainly support the MoES in attaining EFA and quality education—through, for instance, promoting whole-school, holistic interventions that build on the experience gained in implementing the HDO project—it now behoves the Ministry to mobilise its resources to take the pilot project to scale.

2. A greater connectivity between the different educational reforms, so that each initiative complements and sustains the other. This is, in large part, the responsibility of the Ministry, given that they have the overall responsibility for the system, and the duty to ensure that the different parts of the mosaic come together in meaningful ways. This is especially important in the case of the HDO project, where the assumption is that teachers are being trained in interactive, learner-centred pedagogies through their involvement in other projects.
3. A more principled appointment of leading staff in directorates and schools, given that political appointees take the place of persons who have received training to implement the HDO project strategies, and that their unwarranted replacement jeopardises the stability and continuity of the initiative, leading to demotivation and disengagement on the part of many.
4. A more clear articulation of the roles and obligations that are proper to the teaching profession, in such a way that inhibits the present practice of expecting extra remuneration for work which, in most countries, would be considered part and parcel of teachers’ regular duties. Such expectations can seriously threaten the sustainability of the project, which has hitherto proven itself as low cost, high impact initiative.



Recommendations for the future and for the way forward flow naturally from a consideration of the above-mentioned endogenous and exogenous factors.

The report concludes that the HDO project is now at a critical stage, when a firm decision has to be made about going beyond the piloting phase to one that is more national in scope. Despite the challenges that the project has to overcome, there is little doubt that the initiative has grown strong roots in educational communities in the country, and that it has developed the breadth of vision, the effective tools, and the legitimacy and credibility that any project aspiring to go to scale must have. As importantly, the HDO initiative has shown that it is sufficiently well-conceived as to promote ‘multiplier effects’—in other words, it has the ability to vehicle with it the paradigm shift that is much talked about in Albania, and to help bring about a radical change in outlook that will have an impact on the way educational communities go about their work. UNICEF has gained much experience in supporting the

piloting of the initiative, and has much to offer in ensuring that this knowledge is applied in deepening the impact of the project in the pilot schools, and taking it to other regions across the country, and beyond. No project, however, can go to scale without the State’s backing and the State’s resources. It is the State that, with the strategic help of its international partners, has the capacity to sustain a fledgling initiative that has proven itself, but which now requires major investment so that training programmes can be implemented, and practices that have been piloted in a few schools replicated across all the regions—particularly the poorer and more remote ones. This is particularly important given the fact that Albania is one of 25 countries selected in the framework of the EFA-Fast Track initiative. Vigorous State support in improving, deepening and extending the principles underlying the HDO initiative would certainly assist the government face the major challenges of MDG 2 and EFA-FTI implementation, which are crucial and critical issues for Albanian education in the next decade.

# Introducing the context

Two factors stand out in any consideration of the state of education in Albania: first, the breadth and depth of the challenges that lie ahead, and second, the gritty determination to overcome these challenges—against what often seem to be intractable odds. In this Albania is of course not unique. However, its historical, geographical, social and economical circumstances add a specificity and an urgency to the situation that are quite its own.

This case study presents a qualitative account of an initiative that set out to address one of the key educational challenges that Albania has had to face, and is still trying to resolve: the so-called ‘hidden drop-out’ (HDO) problem. The project is an important one, not only because, unlike many others that are being implemented in the country, it is home-grown, but also because it has critical relevance to the rights-based approach to education that has been adopted in view of Albania’s commitment to the global Education for All initiative since the Dakar Forum in 2000.

This report will describe the project, its design and piloting, the difficulties encountered in implementing it and how such problems were tackled or overcome, particularly with a view to ensuring its sustainability. The report will also consider the extent to which the initiative proved to be relevant, effective and efficient, given the specificity of the overall socio-cultural and educational environment in which it was introduced, and the broader reform effort in the country.

In order to be able to do justice to all these aspects of the ‘Hidden Drop-Out’ initiative, it

is important to first of all outline some of the characteristic features that mark the Republic of Albania, particularly its political, social and economic status and the impact this has on educational development. It is to a consideration of these aspects that we first turn.

## General context

Among the most important features that deserve to be highlighted in this context are the following<sup>1</sup>:

- The *troubled transition* from 45 years of communist dictatorship—marked by autocracy, repression, and isolation from the world community—to the gradual shaping of a market-based society with a democratic system of governance marked by freedom of expression and the fair rule of law. In contrast to some other countries in the region, progress in Albania has been hesitant largely due to the deep political and social crisis that followed the failed Pyramid Scheme in 1997, and the outcomes of the Balkan war which, in 1999, led to the influx of over half a million refugees from Kosovo. Both events—together with the persistence of widespread corruption, organised crime, and a weak judicial system—have posed a serious challenge to the Albanian government’s capacity to manage planned social, political and economical development. As with many other countries in the region, Albania has invested in comprehensive legislative reform. Weak administrative capacity as well as limited civil society involvement has however meant that implementation has not followed apace.

<sup>1</sup> The information and data presented in this section are culled from a variety of sources, the most important of which are: UN Albania (2004); The Center for Democratic Education and UNICEF (2004); and Ministry of Education and Science (2004, 2005).

- The *state of the economy* where, despite impressive cumulative growth which saw the country almost triple its per capita GDP (from about US\$700 in 1992 to about US\$2,060 in 2004), widespread poverty, high unemployment and wide regional disparities still prevail. Per capita income is one of the lowest among transition economies. It is estimated that 25% of Albanians live in poverty, while 5% are in a state of extreme poverty (LSMS, 2002). 17% live on US\$1 per day, while 40% live on less than US\$2 daily. Life-chances are strongly segmented according to region, to age, and to gender. 59% of the country's 3.4 million citizens live in rural areas, and nearly half of these suffer from 'unmet basic needs'. The percentage of those active in the formal labour market is very low—thus, while overall only 60% of the working-age population in Albania is economically active, 48% of these are concentrated in the urban areas, even if the majority of would-be workers are to be found in the rural areas. The situation is worst in the north and northeast parts of the country, which are mountainous and remote. Here, limited access to public services, poor road and communications infrastructure, together with low income from agriculture, create enclaves of poverty and unemployment. Given that 48.9% of the population is under 24 years of age, it is not surprising that youths bear the brunt of much of the poverty and unemployment: half of those Albanians classified as poor are under 21 years. Poverty and unemployment rates are higher among women than men, irrespective of age or location.
- The peculiarity of the demographic structure of Albania, together with new-found freedoms and aspirations on the one hand, and frustrations fed by socio-economic instability on the other, have led to external and internal migration movements that have had serious repercussions on the country. Almost 25% of the population has left Albania, resulting in a brain and skills drain at a moment in time when investment in human capital is of paramount importance in the country's nation-building efforts. In addition, internal movements of population have led to urbanization in a largely haphazard, unplanned context: about 40%

have left remote villages and settled in and around the larger cities, creating sprawling and over-crowded peri-urban areas that have overwhelmed the capacity of an already weak public administration, often leaving citizens without access to any public utilities.

## Education in Albania

Educational development in Albania has to be considered in the broader context outlined above if the issues that will be raised in this report are to be clearly understood. Education is an important priority for policy-makers given the contribution it can make to furthering democracy, to promoting an active citizenry, as well as to creating a vibrant, skilled workforce essential to the country's competitiveness, especially in a context marked by resource-scarcity. Albania's attempts to put education on a sound footing have in fact not been half-hearted, as the following developments testify:

- Under the National Strategy for Socio-Economic Development—Albania's Poverty Reduction Strategy—education and health have been given the highest priority for the next 10 years. The government has pledged to achieve Education for All (EFA) by 2015, and has committed itself to increasing funding in order to attain specific goals. A National Education Strategy (MoES, 2004) has been developed for 2004-2015, focusing on pre-university levels, and identifying four priority areas including governance (reforming and strengthening management capacity), improving the quality of the teaching and learning process, financing the pre-university education sector, and capacity building and human resource development. Compulsory education is being extended from 8 to 9 years, with the lower cycle (or Primary) now comprising the 1st to the 5th Grade, and the lower secondary the 6th to the 9th Grade. Teachers' salaries are set to be doubled within a period of four years, in the hope that this will help attract and retain committed professionals to the field. In the meantime, teachers employed at the pre-university level have benefited from an increase of between 30 to 70%, widening the gap between the different salary levels, thus creating more incentives for career progression.

- Increased school autonomy has been stimulated through the promulgation of the document ‘Decentralisation Policies in the Pre-University Education sector’, and through the reform of the process of annual school planning, which engages teachers, students and parents in a collaborative quest for school improvement, within the policy framework established at central level by the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES). Schools are expected to assess themselves against the targets that they themselves have set. The decentralization process is guided by such principles as administrative effectiveness and transparency, a culture of measurement, performance-based management, enhanced leadership roles for school Principals and their deputies, and the implementation of participatory approaches—all with a view to enhancing higher educational achievement for all.

- The curriculum is being reformed to make it more compatible with contemporary developments in teaching and learning, with the complete implementation of a revised basic education curriculum targeted by 2010, and of secondary education curriculum by 2015. The textbook publication market has been liberalised, ensuring that better quality and more attractive and appropriate curriculum-support resources are made available to teachers. Textbooks were distributed free of charge in 2004 to ensure improved equity for all students, irrespective of family background and regional location.

- Major investments in Albania’s education system have been made by individual countries, by donor agencies, and by such international entities and organisations as UNICEF, UNESCO, UNDP, the European Union, GTZ, Soros Foundation, and by the World Bank<sup>2</sup>. Such investments have

provided the government with a substantial funding base in order to undertake the major changes that need to be made, and to do so in a comprehensive manner. Increasingly, too, NGO’s are becoming active in the field, helping to introduce innovative practices in education that resonate closely with the aspirations and needs of the communities they serve. An important and promising development in this regard is the alliance that has been formed between 40 different NGO’s active in the education sector, a coalition called the ‘Albanian Network in Education’ having a privileged access to Parliament<sup>3</sup>.

## Challenges for education in Albania

Such important developments, however, need to be seen in the light of the prevailing situation:

- On average, Albanian children complete 8.6 years of schooling, substantially lagging behind their counterparts in neighbouring countries, falling almost 6 years below the OECD average.

- A sharp drop in pre-school attendance has been registered in recent years. Compared to 1990, in 2003 there were 60% less kindergartens in urban regions, and 49% less in rural regions. While pre-school attendance stood at 57% of 3-6 year-old children, the equivalent for 2003 was 44%.

- While universal primary education has been reached, the secondary education (Grades 9-12) enrolment rate is low at around 50 percent. The regional disparities noted earlier are clearly reflected here as well: while the net secondary enrolment rate is 70% in Tirana, and 60% in urban cities, it is only

<sup>2</sup> This international support for educational development is waning: there has been a de facto reduction in World Bank interest, a purposefully narrow interest on the part of the EU and US AID, and a planned pull-back by OSI/Soros Foundation. In such a climate, there seems to be little support for the idea that for EFA to be achieved on schedule, further research, development and funding are still necessary. The situation could improve with the endorsement of the EFA Fast-Track Initiative, with the World Bank’s role becoming pivotal.

<sup>3</sup> The optimism about this initiative is tempered by caution: several NGO’s are in fact set up by government officials in order to make bids for projects that they have privileged information about from donors. As such, while registered as NGO’s, they organize few if any activities, and have little impact on the educational sector.

25% in rural areas, where about 85% of high schools have been closed down. Only 62% of 14 year-old children finish compulsory schooling in due time. About 25% drop out from obligatory schooling, and this—together with the fact that some children are never registered at school—explain the resurgence of illiteracy, which was officially eliminated in the years before 1990.

- There are further important discrepancies between education in urban and rural contexts: schools in the former tend to be overcrowded, with over 50-60 students per class, and with many schools operating with double or triple shifts. Schools in remote areas, on their part, have very small student-teacher ratios, given the continued migration to urban centres. This leads to the creation of so-called ‘collective classes’—but teachers have often not been trained to teach in multi-Grade instructional environments<sup>4</sup>. In the best of cases, the teacher divides the class into different age groups, and works with one group after another, with those who are not receiving the teacher’s immediate attention waiting silently until it is their turn for instruction. In other cases, students end up being ‘passenger pupils’, who in effect sit through the class, even pass from one Grade to the next, without attaining the learning objectives set by the curriculum.
- Regular school attendance as well as drop-out rates are greatly influenced by indigence, by whether children are from urban or rural areas, by gender, and by ethnicity. Girls from poor rural backgrounds are among the most susceptible to miss out on their schooling, particularly when they attain puberty<sup>5</sup>. Other at-risk groups include Romany and Evgjit (gypsy) children, whose average schooling is respectively 4.02 and 5.05 years. An estimated 32% of six- to eighteen-year-old children are involved in child labour.
- There is very little in the way of catering for the special needs of around 12,000 children with disabilities, with the state offering services to only 9.5% of them in residential care institutions, day care centres or specialised schools. Disabled children are not required to complete compulsory schooling.
- The higher education enrolment rate, while on the increase, remains low at around 13%, and the system is generally considered to be only marginally responsive to the needs of a changing labour market. About 30% of academic staff has left the universities.
- The vocational school system is also suffering from several problems, and is proving to be unattractive to students: only 7.3% of young people aged 14-18 years attend long-term schools from which they graduate with officially accepted professional qualifications.
- Educational attainment is low, irrespective of whether internal or external assessment benchmarks are used. Almost one-third of basic school students attain the lowest possible mark among six satisfactory grades, with the performance being even weaker in rural areas. Students from rural areas achieve 30% lower scores than those from urban areas, and children from poor families achieve 40% less than students from non-poor families. Overall, Albanian students scored second worst in the international assessments of student learning outcomes in reading, mathematics and science literacy (PISA 2000), and were outperformed by other countries in the region against which Albania’s labour force competes.
- Public spending on education as a share of GDP has declined steadily from 3.7% in 1995 to 2.8% in 2004, making Albanian education the most under-funded system in Europe. Education spending in Albania is in fact

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<sup>4</sup> The National Centre for Training and Qualifications has recently produced two publications on multi-Grade teaching in order to provide support to teachers who have to deal with this reality. In some of the rural areas, the situation is very challenging for teachers, with as many as four Grades in one classroom with the same teacher

<sup>5</sup> Causes include fears about trafficking combined with long distances to schools, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, cultural beliefs and poor enforcement of the compulsory school law. No accurate data are available to assess gender inequities in education.

substantially lower than the OECD average (approximately 5.2%) or the average of other Southeast European countries (average 4%) or other lower-middle income countries. Public spending on education as a share of the total public expenditure has remained at approximately 10% since 1995, which again compares unfavourably to the average of new EU countries (14%) or lower-middle income countries. Limited public spending on education results in the transfer of some of the costs of schooling onto households, which in turn acts as a disincentive for the enrolment of children from poor families.

- While efforts have been made to increase wages for teachers, the budget for non-salary recurrent expenditure has remained limited (approximately 12% of the total recurrent budget in education), resulting in inadequate provision of teaching-learning materials, teacher training and facilities maintenance.

### Sector-related roots of education challenges

While some of these problems arise out of the broader economic, social, cultural and political contexts in which schools are embedded, others are more directly traceable to the education system itself. Chief among these are the following:

- Demoralised and demotivated teachers, whose earning power is low when compared to other public employment remuneration scales, and who have been ill-equipped by their initial and continued professional training to deal with the realities of classroom life. In-service training is largely supply-driven, often organised on an unsystematic, ad hoc basis, with teachers getting 3 to 5 days of training per year. The decreasing attractiveness of the profession has led to a mass exodus of teachers after 1991, which necessitated the engagement of unqualified staff. In Grades 1 to 4, 18% of teachers in rural schools are unqualified, while the rate

for urban schools is 6%. In Grades 1 to 8, 33% of rural school teachers and 14% of urban school teachers are unqualified (MoES, 2002). These averages hide the sorry state of some remote regions, where as many as 40% of teachers may be without any formal professional qualifications. For the year 2000-2001, 22% of education graduates were not interested in taking up teaching as a career, while 37% refused to work in the places they were assigned to (MOES, 2005). Inadequate training leads teachers to rely exclusively on the official textbooks provided by the state, and to centre their teaching on them. Most of these textbooks are unattractive, overburdened with information, and fail to connect with the students' frameworks of relevance or with their cognitive and developmental stages. They also tend to emphasise rote-learning rather than help develop critical thinking skills.

- Schools are greatly under-resourced. Teachers are not supported by pedagogical materials and resources, and end up using a narrow repertoire of instructional approaches which engage only the more achieving students, and which end up marginalising the rest. Typically, the Albanian teacher uses authoritarian teaching styles rather than facilitative, learner-centred ones. Generally speaking, schools in Albania provide a spartan environment—particularly so in rural and pre-urban regions, where buildings are often run-down, and without such basic facilities as toilets.
- The management of the education sector tends to be weak at both the central level, and at the level of the school itself. While the principle of decentralisation has gained common currency, hasty implementation has left the government without the management capacity to monitor developments, and with terms of reference for the different levels not clearly specified<sup>6</sup>. There has been little investment in the capacity building that is required if local authorities and school

<sup>6</sup> The educational administration at Local Government (level of municipality), and Regional-level Education Directorates cover two very different sets of functions, the former concerned with all that relates to school construction and maintenance, the latter to everything concerned with teachers, curriculum and the quality of the educational experience. 13 RED's were set by the MoES up in 2004, with responsibilities for educational standards and school inspection. The municipality has tended to distribute funds to schools in ways that are politically rather than educationally expedient.

directors are to transform increased autonomy into improved attainment for all students under their care. Lines of responsibility at the different decision-making levels are not clearly outlined, leading to inaction and finger-pointing rather than ownership of problems. At higher levels, authoritarian management approaches persist, as does a reluctance to set up accountability measures and more participative structures in the decision-making process. Apathy on the

part of right-holders such as parents and students—typical for citizens from former dictatorial countries—lets duty-bearers off the hook when it comes to the timely and successful implementation of promised reforms. Political affiliation rather than ability still tends to be a key factor in the nomination to leadership posts, a fact which does little to encourage the adoption of performance-based management systems or of the principle of transparency.

# The ‘hidden drop-out’ initiative in Albania

The challenges for education in Albania are therefore substantial, not least because so many aspects of the system must be addressed simultaneously if the resulting changes are to be more than just cosmetic. This case-study focuses on one initiative promoted by an Albanian NGO, and supported by UNICEF—an initiative which, while apparently targeting a specific problem, namely the tendency for Albanian teachers to focus solely on achieving students and to ignore the rest of the class—has implications for several other issues related to educational practice in the country, some of which have been outlined above.

## Research Methodology

In what follows, I will provide a critical account of this initiative, taking care to document its introduction and development, and to assess its reach and impact. In so doing I will draw on several relevant documents, including UNICEF country annual reports and Medium-Term Strategic Plan, MoES and Albanian government documents, the National Dossier in Education: Indicators and Trends, HDO project proposals and reports, MoES and Regional

Education Directorate (RED) correspondence regarding the HDO project, articles from the Teachers’ MoES magazine, the three booklets published in the HDO series, and several other sources, such as excerpts from teachers’ daily diaries (in which they record the MNLO for the day), examples of Annual School Plans, peer tutoring monthly plans, and field reports by UNICEF education programme officers.

I will also draw on fieldwork carried out between the 13th and 25th November 2005<sup>7</sup>, which entailed visits to Gjirokastrër (15th to 17th November) and Korçë (21st to 23rd November), two of the districts and regions piloting the initiative—the others being the regions of Tiranë, Shkodër, and Dibër, and the districts of Kavaja and Delvina<sup>8</sup>. Several persons were interviewed individually or in groups in Gjirokastrër and Korçë, and 10 classrooms—each with an average of 25 pupils—were also observed. The rest of the days were spent in Tirana city, where interviews with key officials from the Ministry, UNICEF and other organisations were held, and where one non-project school and classroom hour were observed with a view to facilitating

<sup>7</sup> I owe a debt of gratitude to the UNICEF officials who were so forthcoming with information, advice and feedback. I would like to mention in particular Philippe Testot-Ferry (UNICEF regional office, Geneva) whose idea it was to commission this review, and Carrie Auer (representative) and Aurora Bushati (education programme officer) at the UNICEF office in Tirana, who left no stone unturned in order to ensure that the fieldwork could be carried out in as smooth and thorough a manner as possible. Thanks are also due to Ms Gerda Sula, the local consultant, for so ably supporting the review process, to all the education staff who agreed to meet with me and to be interviewed or observed teaching, and particularly to Professor Stavri Llambiri, director of the ‘Development of Education’ Association, and lynchpin of the project, whose vision, energy and commitment to ensure that no child is left behind are exemplary. I would also like to acknowledge the support of Lindita Hasimi, who provided excellent interpretation services during the fieldwork, and who also carefully translated relevant excerpts from key documents related to the HDO project.

<sup>8</sup> Albania has 13 regions (Qarks). The regions, districts, schools and teachers involved in the project were selected according to criteria established by the project team in collaboration with the Regional Education Directorate, and with an eye on EFA principles. Korçë, for instance, was chosen due to the concentration of Roma and Evgjit children in the schools.



comparison and contrast with classrooms and teachers involved in the project<sup>9</sup>. Details of the

extent of the fieldwork are presented below:

	Schools visited	Principals	Deputy Principals	Teachers	Parents	Students	Lesson hrs observed
Gjirokaštër	3	6	6	16	3	6	3
Korçë	3	6	6	11	/	10	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>27*</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>10</b>

*\* Note: Teachers who attended focus group interviews came from other schools besides the ones visited. Some of these 27 teachers were also involved in training others in the MNLO approach.*

Individual semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 minutes to an hour or more were carried out with key persons from the MoES at both the central level in Tirana (with the Director of the Institute of Curricula and Standards, and the Director of the National Training and Qualifications Centre for Education, who accompanied the evaluation mission in Gjirokaštër, thus providing several opportunities for discussion and deepening of insights) and at the regional level (with the present and past Regional Education Directors of Gjirokaštër and Korçë, as well as the mayor of the former Qark); with the Deans of the Faculties of Education of the University of Korçë and of Gjirokaštër, and in the case of the latter, with the Rector as well. Further interviews were carried out with the coordinator of the HDO project in Korçë, with an inspector in charge of in-service training in Gjirokaštër, with persons from four NGO's ('Save the Children', the Soros Foundation, the Center for Democratic Education, and NPF—Aid for Children) and representatives from the European Commission, and the World Bank. The director of the 'Development of Education' Association—the Albanian NGO providing the technical expertise for the HDO project—was interviewed at length on two occasions.

Efforts were made to solicit views about the HDO project from persons who were not directly connected to it, and who had not been

included in the itinerary organized by UNICEF. Two Albanian education specialists—both Ph.D. holders with close connections to the MoES, UNICEF and several NGO's—were interviewed individually in an attempt to generate critical, impartial insights about both the project itself, and the education context more generally. One of these two is himself the director of a leading NGO. Both have experience in textbook writing for different levels of the education sector. The Principal and two teachers from a private school in Korçë were also interviewed informally on two separate occasions.

Sustained, lengthy conversations were held with UNICEF officials based in Tirana, particularly with the organisation's representative and with the education programme officer. The latter was responsible for organizing the visits and for accompanying me during practically all the observation and interview sessions. Both provided me with insights about the origins and development of the project, UNICEF's involvement, as well as other relevant contextual information.

It is important to point out that the fieldwork entailed close collaboration with a local consultant, herself an education specialist and director of an international NGO, the 'Step-by-Step Association'. Ms Sula had been commissioned to collect preliminary interview

<sup>9</sup> A previous one-week-long research visit early in 2005—on behalf of the European Training Foundation, and focusing on career guidance offered in the education and labour market sector—provided a number of sensitising concepts that proved useful when it came to a deeper understanding of cultural, political, economic and systemic issues.

data in relation to the HDO project prior to my visit<sup>10</sup>, and in addition she also accompanied me during most of the classroom observations and interviews in Tirana and Korçë. Her in-depth knowledge of the education system in Albania, of school and classroom contexts and dynamics, of the range of instructional strategies that Albanian teachers typically use in the early Grades of primary schooling, and of the constraints surrounding teachers' professional lives, proved to be invaluable. Both formal and informal semi-structured and unstructured interviews were conducted with her, enabling the constant comparison of notes and reflections concerning the lessons observed, and the data collected. In many ways this helped to check perceptions, test hypothesis, and verify whether it was valid to make generalisations based on what had been observed in particular classrooms, or what had been said during an interview.

Finally, it should also be noted that my own fieldwork was complemented by data that was made available by the UNICEF office, consisting of excerpts from interviews carried out by DoE staff with 30 teachers, 150 students and 50 parents as part of an evaluation exercise involving pilot schools in Shkodër, Gjirokastër, Tiranë, Korçë, Dibër, and Peshkopi. Selections from such excerpts—largely focusing on peer learning and mini-testing—are occasionally cited in this report, in which case they are marked with a cross (†). Excerpts cited do not represent the 'science of the singular', but are representative of others in the overall fieldwork databank.

## The hidden drop-out problem

EFA assumes that all children of the requisite ages will be enrolled in and complete the basic education cycle. However, enrolment in formal education and completion of schooling do not guarantee learning achievement. Much research energy has been expended on observing teaching and learning processes

the world over, trying to understand why and how so many students fail to master basic reading, writing and math skills after eight or more years of compulsory schooling. A key reason seems to be the organisation of teaching around whole-class instruction, rather than also around small groups and individual students, the hallmark of effective teachers (Anderson, 2004). Within a whole-class instructional setting, the role of the teacher tends to focus on presenting information, demonstrating procedures, and asking questions. The pitching of the content and the pacing of the delivery tend to be decided exclusively by the teacher, who in terms of both tends to focus on the mainstream or 'average' student, ignoring the specific learning needs of the other students in the class. Among these are the weaker students. The latter fail to keep up with the teacher, lose interest in the lessons, and slide into a state of disengagement from learning which untrained or uncommitted teachers tolerate—and even encourage—as long as the student does not become troublesome or unruly. These pupils do not physically drop out of school, but are somewhat like 'phantoms in the classroom', present for the purposes of the roll call, but not visible for the purpose of learning and instruction.

It is this phenomenon that the HDO project set out to address. Actual 'drop-outs'—also referred to in the international literature as 'non-attenders', 'non-completers' or 'early school-leavers'—are, in a sense, somewhat more visible for the policy-maker than the 'hidden drop-outs'. Most countries keep statistics about the former, and several countries and supra-national entities such as the European Union include school drop-out rates as a quality indicator (European Commission, 2001). Both the incidence of dropping out as well, as its causes, have often been investigated by educational researchers<sup>11</sup>, and this is true for Albania as well, where a recent study in five districts examined the predictors and consequences of dropping

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<sup>10</sup> Ms Sula carried out three field trips to Shkodër, Gjirokastër and Korçë, where she observed 5 lesson hours. She conducted semi-structured interviews with the Director of the National Centre for Training and Qualification for Education, one University professor, two Directors of Regional Education Departments, five specialists from the same departments, and conducted focus group interviews with 17 Principals and deputy Principals, as well as 20 teachers—all of whom were involved in the HDO project.

<sup>11</sup> For a brief but useful overview of the literature, see Natriello (1997).

out in a sample of 551 children between the ages of 7 to 17 years (Musai & Boce, 2003). An earlier study supported by UNICEF had revealed that more than 100,000 children were dropping out of compulsory schooling, or at risk of doing so (cited by CDE & UNICEF, 2004, p.57). Hidden drop-outs, on the other hand, tend to be less visible not only to the teacher, but, ironically, to the policy-maker as well. And yet, as a joint publication by the DoE Association and UNICEF (2002) notes, “The number of children dropping out of school is much smaller if comparison is drawn with the number of those pupils sitting at school desks on a daily basis who do not necessarily receive the due attention of their teachers.”

## The response to the HDO phenomenon

Awareness of this problem led UNICEF to team up with a national NGO—the ‘Development of Education’ (DoE) Association—to design the HDO Project in 2001 with a view to improving the learning achievement of all students, especially those at risk of being left behind<sup>12</sup>. The project has gone through a number of phases and funding cycles (see Table below). It was launched in the district of Kavaja, and then expanded to five other regions. To date, the project has been implemented in 60 schools, reaching over 5,000 students in Grades 1 to 4, with the initiative focusing on Albanian language and Mathematics in the main. Of the schools involved in the project, two per region were designated as ‘model schools’, and were allocated additional resources and assistance by the DoE Association and the RED so that they could serve as resource centres for the rest of the schools. Model school teachers wrote up their experiences and developed pedagogic material that could be used in the training of

teachers from other schools. Core teams of teachers and school inspectors were trained in each region, with these then acting as change agents, and helping to train others with the help of Manuals written specifically for the purpose. Training has been extended to 350 teachers of Grades 1 to 4, 178 school Principals, 30 inspectors, 6 student councils, and 6 peer-to-peer learning groups.

As we shall note in greater detail below, teachers in the schools where the project was piloted were trained in writing up learning objectives and devising tests to verify whether these objectives had been attained; Principals were trained to prepare annual school plans based on concrete and measurable objectives; inspectors were trained in the overall approach so that they supported the whole process when evaluating and supporting teachers; while students, parents and other members of the community (such as retired teachers, for instance) received some training in order to serve as tutors to at-risk pupils. A Steering Committee composed of the project coordinator and his assistant (both from the DoE Association, with Professor Llambiri as Chair), officials from UNICEF, and from high-level officials at the MoES (one from the Curriculum Department, one from the Department of Human Resources, and one from the Inspection Department) managed the different aspects of the initiative. In each region, the project was driven by a Local Group led by a co-ordinator, and made up of the director of the RED and one or two of its education specialists. The RED was also responsible for identifying the schools that would become involved in the project, and for the training of staff. In each pilot school, the project was led by a School Group, made up of the Principal, the person responsible for the peer learning activities and/or of the Student Council.

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<sup>12</sup> DoEA experts had proposed several possible issues that UNICEF could focus on in its attempt to be respond to the most pressing and relevant needs of Albanian society. UNICEF opted to take on the HDO challenge because it was guided by the CRC and EFA Forum (Dakar, 2000) principles, which put a focus on marginalized children and on hidden marginalization

	Budget	Target group	Activities
<b>Phase 1</b> Feb–Dec 2001 (10 months)	\$15,500	- 4 schools - 1 region	Survey
<b>Phase 2</b> April–June 2002, Sept '02–May '03 (10 months)	\$58,000	- 18 schools - 5 more regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dissemination of survey results and booklet Hidden Drop-Outs</li> <li>- Training seminars with teachers and Principals in pilot schools, and with specialists from local educational authorities</li> <li>- Involvement of specialists from the Institute of Pedagogical Studies</li> <li>- Engagement of high-level officials from MoES as local coordinators or members of the Central Team.</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 3</b> Dec '03–June '04 October 2004 (8 months)	\$50,000	- 38 more schools (60 in all) - All 6 regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Awareness raising of stakeholders through publications and training</li> <li>- Developing pedagogic and school management strategies to reduce the HDO phenomenon</li> <li>- Expand the network of change agents through training</li> <li>- Institutionalise pedagogic and management practices that had been piloted in the earlier phases of the project</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 4</b> Sept '05- June '06 (10 months)	\$100,000	- 20 more schools - 2 pilot regions involved in designing local EFA strategies to make operational the MDG 2 - Compulsory education nationwide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The new approach in Korçë and Kukes (new target area in the North-East) regions is assisting them to prepare EFA local strategies. This process is combined with deepening and expanding practices on the prevention and reduction of the HDO phenomenon.</li> <li>- Collaboration with the National Centre of Training and Qualification regarding the expansion of project experiences on a national scale.</li> </ul>

While not articulated as such, the initiative seems to have been designed in the spirit of an 'action research' project (see, inter alia, Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), where a problem is identified by a community of practitioners, an investigation of the specific nature and causes of the problem is carried out, leading to the articulation of strategies for overcoming it, with further reflection and analysis following the implementation phase in a never-ending cycle of reflection-action-reflection that leads to constant change. Generally speaking, action research projects

have a strong social justice agenda, in that the change aimed for targets institutions and practices that work against the interests of marginalised individuals and groups.

## Awareness-raising

The early stages of the project set out to identify the extent of the HDO problem by focusing on four schools in one district (Kavaja). A multi-faceted survey was launched in early 2001 focusing comprehensively on the phenomenon of students' marginalization within the regular

classroom<sup>13</sup>. The project team observed classes in a range of subjects (Albanian language and literature, mathematics, biology, geography and physics) and used both interviews and questionnaires to deepen their understanding of the views that teachers, school Principals, inspectors and officers from the educational directorate, as well as parents held of the learning process. An additional focus involved the documentation of the views of achieving and under-achieving pupils, with interviews also being held with past pupils who had not experienced much success at school.

Teachers were asked to make an estimate of the number of pupils who would be able to assimilate the learning objectives they had planned. In most cases teachers said that, on average, only around 65% of the students would succeed—but surprisingly, none declared any intention of modifying their lesson plan or their teaching methodology in order to ensure that all—or at least most—of the pupils would benefit from the session. These teachers were then observed teaching, and due note was taken of the ratio between whole-class teaching on the one hand, to teaching that revolved around group work or individual students on the other. Observations also focused on the way the teacher distributed questions around the class, and on the patterns of encouragement and reprimands used. At the end of the lesson, the project team set a ‘mini-test’ focusing on the learning objectives that had been targeted. In each case students were asked to answer three questions, with the first one being the easiest, and the third one the most challenging. Tests were also administered at the end of the school year, in order to gauge the number of students who had mastered the minimal competences set for that Grade.

The main outcomes of this research can be summarised as follows:

1. Much of the teaching observed was based on whole-class instruction. On average, individual or group work took up about 17

minutes of a 45-minute lesson, and even then, most of those 17 minutes involved a student standing next to the teacher in front of the blackboard, repeating aspects of the lesson in front of the whole class. The whole-class approach applied to the assigning of homework tasks as well: as a general rule, there was no differentiation in the exercises set, with students often resorting to copying and cheating in order not to lose face and to avoid reprimands.

2. Much of the teacher-student communication observed followed the same predictable, teacher-directed pattern that Bellack et al. (1966) usefully characterised as structure (tell)—solicit (ask)—response (answer)—react (to the answers). Student-directed patterns of communication—i.e. where it is the students who tell teachers things, ask them questions, give them an opportunity to answer the questions, and react to their answers—were negligible. In most cases, the researchers noted, students were reduced to passive listeners. Not a single situation was observed throughout the survey period where students told their teacher that they had not managed to understand a particular segment of the lesson.
3. The question-answer interaction was generally very brief, lasting between 3 to 5 seconds. As Brophy (2001, p.19) has noted, such interactions do not encourage what he refers to as ‘thoughtful discourse’, where students are stimulated “to process and reflect on content, recognize relationships among and implications of its key ideas, think critically about it, and use it in problem-solving, decision-making or other higher-order applications.”
4. On average, almost 16 questions were asked by the teacher during every teaching hour. However, the distribution of questions was heavily skewed towards the more able students, who were asked 4.7 times more questions than pupils who were getting

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<sup>13</sup> This section describing the first phase of the HDO project relies largely on information provided by Professor Llambiri in the course of two interviews, and on a book in Albanian titled *The Hidden Drop-Outs* written by Llambiri on behalf of the DoE Association and published by UNICEF in 2002. Key excerpts of this book, which was written with teachers in mind, were translated by the UNICEF office. Several UNICEF reports were also scanned for additional details.

failing (grade 4) or near-failing (grade 5) marks for their work.

5. A statistical count of the glossary of positive feedback compared to words of admonishment and reproach indicated a very strong bias towards the latter. Even more significantly, the highest achieving and the average pupils received respectively 5.4 and 2.8 times more encouragement and praise than students who are not doing well. The latter were reproached and criticised 1.6 times more than the successful students.
6. Communication between teachers and under-achieving students was largely limited to issues related to behaviour rather than to one-to-one coaching to help overcome learning difficulties. Communication between parents and the school also tended to focus on behavioural issues, rather than ones that had to do with learning, and with improving achievement. Interviews with parents carried out in this exploratory survey phase also suggested that few had a notion that teachers could make a positive difference in facilitating learning progress for their children.
7. In most cases, the results of the mini-tests indicated that only about half of the students in each of the classes tested obtained a pass mark in the range of subjects focused on. Indeed, 73% of the pupils performed below the teachers' expectations which, as has already been noted, were already low. Teachers' predictions of success were only correct in 5% of the cases, while in 22% of the cases the students did better than their teachers expected them to. The variation between projected and real outcome was greatest when it came to the answers to the third and more challenging question set in the mini-tests—it was not uncommon to find that while teachers were predicting that 70% of the class had assimilated the lesson objectives and would get the answer right, only 30% of them did do so in reality. On average, students from the village schools did worse than those from the town schools.
8. Analysis of test results over a period of three months (October to December 2001) indicated that students rarely if ever improve their grades, and that they enter into what can be likened to a 'caste' system where success or failure becomes institutionalised into a 'school career'<sup>14</sup>. There was, however, one striking exception: grade 4's (i.e. failing grades) are regularly transformed into grade 5's (minimum pass mark) at the end of the term (from over 26% to over 17%), and particularly at the end of the year (down to just over 2%). In other words, students are given a pass mark, even when they have not mastered the necessary minimum knowledge base set for their level, in order to keep them moving on through the school Grades and to avoid repetition.
9. Not surprisingly, interviews with under-achieving pupils indicated that while they experienced constant failure at school, they gave evidence of a lively, inquisitive intelligence in out-of-school contexts, where they were successfully learning skills and competences, and mastering areas of knowledge, indicating possession of gifts and talents that the school had failed to recognise. As the lead researcher in the survey noted "It is fair to say that [these students] have not failed school: rather, it is the school that has failed them."
10. Interviews with the teachers indicated that the latter generally attributed the main causes of underachievement to lack of parental support and care (39%), and to the students themselves (36%). 7% of the causes were blamed on the lack of pedagogical equipment and 3% on the

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<sup>14</sup> This 'caste' syndrome is reinforced by the fact that in many cases, teachers follow their students through the first cycle of the basic school. Once a pupil falls beneath the radar of teacher attention and effort, there is every likelihood that that state of affairs persists from the first to the fourth Grade at least—by which time a pattern is set. International research strongly suggests that the chances of such a pupil to re-engage with schooling are slim, and that repeated exposure to ineffective teaching results in little gains in achievement, with the impact being additive and cumulative (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Sustained experience of ineffective teaching in fact far outweighs the effects of differences in class size and class heterogeneity (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

quality of the textbooks. Only 2% of the causes for student failure were attributed to the teachers themselves. Failing past students—some of them now with children of their own—seem to have integrated this deficit model, and responded to the researchers' questions regarding attribution for under-achievement by blaming themselves. They often considered lack of school achievement as a personal problem, with the teachers' admonitions as a sort of ritual publicly confirming their status as somehow being at fault.

11. Interviews with teachers, Principals and inspectors revealed that the expectations were that students in the upper Grades of the basic school cycle would spend anywhere between five-and-a-half to six-and-a-half hours every day doing their homework and studying. Students, on their part, claimed that a little over two hours was more than enough for them. The point here is that educators seem to expect the school to transfer much of the responsibility for learning to the home, irrespective of the type of environment and the quality of support that children coming from different backgrounds find.

## The survey follow-up

Despite the limited nature of the initial research, involving as it did only four schools in only one of thirteen regions in Albania, the survey served three key purposes which proved to be critical in providing the impetus for the piloting of a project that, as we shall see, generated a very important set of dynamics and innovative practices in the country's education sector.

First, the survey served to 'unmask' the 'hidden drop-out' problem and to make it visible by giving it a name, and by providing limited but striking qualitative and quantitative data to show how the phenomenon was produced at the school site by the school itself. Many teachers, Principals and deputies I interviewed in the course of my fieldwork recalled being somewhat taken-aback by the use of the term 'hidden drop-out'. They recounted how their curiosity about the term turned to shock when, on reading the book reporting on the HDO phenomenon<sup>15</sup> or attending the dissemination seminars that were organised during the piloting phase of the project, they realised that they were deeply implicated in the matter, and that their instructional strategies and overall management of the class and school learning environment had such a negative impact on such a large group of students. Many also reported that the depiction of classroom life in all its qualitative detail rang true, and that they therefore felt convinced that the initial research had relevance for most schools and regions beyond those that had been involved in the initial stages of the research.

The survey, however, did more than put the spotlight on a problem: it also tried to explain why the phenomenon existed. In particular, it provided an alternative perspective by means of which the issue of low learning achievement could be viewed. The prevalent approach saw failure as an individual act, signalling individual, or family or cultural failure. In this approach, the teacher and the school were not at fault: others were. In contrast, the HDO project data—and the interpretive framework underpinning suggests that drop-outs, hidden or actual, are in fact 'push-outs': it is the school that selects, stratifies and differentiates

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<sup>15</sup> Most of those interviewed spoke highly about this book, titled *The Hidden Drop-Outs* (Llambiri, 2001), saying that it was written in a language that was accessible to the teacher, and that was connected to the reality of classroom life. They had found it challenging and provocative but fair, and felt that it had "helped them find themselves in their profession", revitalizing their commitment to teaching. One Principal of a school in a rural area outside of Gjirokastër said about the book that "it has become part of our personal library, and not just in the library of the school." Others said that when they read the book, they felt that Llambiri was describing their own school. Three other short volumes have been written in this series, one focusing on the Minimum Learning Objectives for Students (Llambiri, 2004), another on *The School Principal* (Llambiri, 2004), and a fourth titled *From the End to the Beginning*, which is still in print. Around a 1000 copies of each of the first three booklets were distributed free of charge, thanks to UNICEF support. A fifth volume, which presents evidence of improved learning thanks to the HDO project, and which focuses on Peer-to-Peer Learning, is planned for the near future.

between students—purportedly on the basis of ‘ability’—serving to ‘warm up’ some and ‘cool out’ others (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963). Kelly (1997) would argue that both the ‘drop-out’ and ‘push-out’ perspective on disengagement from learning are somewhat extreme—in the sense that the first puts inordinate blame on the individual, while the second puts inordinate blame on the institution. However, the suggestion that the school has a hand in producing failures, and that the way schools and teachers organise and manage the instructional encounters can increase or decrease the failure rate, served as a salutary and provocative wake-up call for Albanian educators at the school and system level alike. This is extremely important in a context where notions of transparency and accountability have not yet taken root, and where attribution of blame to external factors is the norm.

Third, the initial survey also served to provide an X-ray into the classroom-based processes

that contribute to lack of learning achievement in the country. The survey’s detailed analysis of aspects of classroom interaction showed up some of the processes by means of which pupils ‘disengaged’ from learning. The notion of ‘disengagement’ (Fine, 1990) is an important one and, to my mind, conceptually more refined and helpful than such terms as ‘drop-outs’ or even of a ‘push-outs’ since it underscores the idea that dropping-out is, first of all, a long-running, interactive process that needs to be seen in a life-course perspective (Alexander, Entwistle & Kabbani, 2001) and not a singular event marked by finality, and secondly, that it involves cumulative acts of mutual rejection. More importantly, the ‘disengagement’ metaphor helps us understand that the process is potentially reversible. In other words, if the two-toothed gear-wheels (i.e. student and school) have grown apart over time, there may very well be ways of getting them to mesh together again, so that the motion of one is passed on to the other.



# Key features of the HDO initiative

While the DoE Association and UNICEF initiative employs the term ‘drop-out’, the use of that term is very much aligned with the idea that teachers and schools can organise the learning environment differently so that ‘disengagement’ does not occur, and where it does, to ensure that the process is caught in time so that students do re-engage. Using the initial survey results as a platform, the DoE Association, with the support of UNICEF, designed a cluster of inter-connected initiatives that, under the title ‘the Hidden Drop-Out Project’, set out to address several aspects of school and classroom life that could potentially have an impact on learning achievement. All were trialled in pilot schools, the number of which was gradually increased with the hope of building up a critical mass of ‘change agents’ who could disseminate the tools and strategies through training and sharing of successful practice across the country. The project was designed to act as yeast both across schools and within schools, and to trigger off a range of linked, innovative practices that touched a variety of aspects at classroom, school and community levels. As the Director of Basic Education noted in a letter to UNICEF dated 30 November 2001, when reflecting on the outcomes of the piloting of the HDO project in Kavaja, the hope was that the initiative would “serve as a basis for a broad movement focused on the marginalization of students in our schools.”

## Targeting learning outcomes

The keystone holding together the architecture of the HDO initiative is the conviction that it is imperative to challenge the dominant mentality in public institutions in Albania which gives precedence to system inputs rather than to system outputs. This is also true for the education sector, and at all levels.

DoE Association staff argued that, as a result of such a mentality, the MoES was happy to report increases in education budgets, or in the amount of training offered, but was much less forthcoming in measuring and reporting on the extent to which such inputs were indeed translated into improved learning outcomes for all. At the school level, too, Principals were more willing to focus on input-related factors when it came to developing their annual plan, giving much attention to what could be improved in the buildings and infrastructure, but hardly ever focusing on assessing and improving student achievement. At the classroom level, teachers felt that their responsibility was in explaining the textbook, and that it was largely up to the students to learn, and to the parents to monitor learning. As one of the publications of the HDO project notes, teachers in Albania tend to have “an irresponsible attitude towards the achievement of their pupils... There is no official regulation that requires teachers to declare the learning objectives for each subject, they never take time to verify the results achieved, and they never evaluate their own efforts to see what needs to be done to improve their teaching methodology” (DoE & UNICEF, 2001). As a result, some students easily slip away from an engagement with learning, but many parents remain unaware of this given that learning objectives that should be attained per Grade are not made transparent by the teacher or the school, and there is little if any pressure on the teacher in terms of accountability to parents, the school Principal, or the inspectorate.

One of the key goals of the project was precisely to challenge such a mentality by focusing the attention of school communities on learning achievements. By so doing, project leaders felt that not only would they be increasing the chances for all to succeed, but also to make

the education sector more transparent and accountable to parents and the community. The project attempted to achieve such goals by developing five linked tools or strategies, namely:

1. Teaching ‘minimum necessary learning objectives’
2. Constant monitoring of MNLO learning through mini-tests
3. Supporting under-achieving students through peer tutoring
4. Community involvement in attaining learning objectives
5. Designing an annual school plan with learning objectives in mind

The implementation of each tool required a strong investment in training, and aspects related to that are dealt with in a comprehensive manner in the final section of this chapter of the report.

## Teaching ‘Minimum Necessary Learning Objectives’

The initial survey carried out by the DoE Association had, as we have noted above, highlighted the regular and conspicuous failure of teachers to pitch their lessons appropriately, often overestimating the extent to which students would attain the learning outcomes planned. The project response to this was to develop the notion of ‘minimum necessary learning objectives’ (MNLO) for learning segments, a concept that has close affinities with notions of ‘competency-based teaching’

and ‘mastery learning’ that were developed in the US and internationally in the 1970’s and 1980’s (see Sultana, 2004).

Learning objectives are first of all referred to as ‘minimal’ because, in tune with EFA principles, they represent the basic knowledge that every child is entitled to, and which are likely to be both challenging for—and attainable by—the vast majority of pupils. They are therefore also ‘necessary’, in that teachers are duty-bound to ensure transmission to and assimilation by learners since these objectives are part of the official curricular programme for all schools, and also because they guide teachers in distinguishing between what must be known, and what is over and above the minimum required<sup>16</sup>. In this sense, then, mastery of basic skills is given priority over excessive coverage. In the HDO project, care was taken to distinguish between objectives that had to do with skills (e.g. knowing how to multiply), and those that targeted higher order learning that had to do with the understanding of concepts underpinning the skills. The first, in line with Bloom’s well-known taxonomy, tend to rely on memory and procedural knowledge, the second on thinking and creativity.

In the view of the project leaders, the problems teachers had in pitching lessons at the correct level were linked to two factors. In the first place, teachers were led by the textbook rather than by learning objectives. This necessitated a shift whereby the textbook is no longer considered to be the aim of teaching, but the means to a learning objective. Secondly, teachers did not have the skills to write up learning objectives that were realistic, attainable by all the pupils,

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<sup>16</sup> In order to help teachers understand whether an objective qualifies as a MNLO, the second in the series of four volumes dedicated to the HDO project—a Manual on the writing of MNLO’s—suggests that they consider the following three questions: (a) Is this objective necessary for the further acquisition of a subject at school, and for living effectively as an adult? (b) Are all pupils capable of achieving this objective? (c) Is this objective too low even for the least achieving students, thus impeding progress to higher levels of knowledge? The Manual states that learning objectives generally speaking have four integral parts, namely (a) ‘address’ (i.e. clearly specifying the focus of the learning: e.g. “At the end of the chapter ‘division outside the table’ of the mathematics for Grade 3, a pupil should be able to...”); (b) ‘assignment’ (i.e. clearly specifying what the pupil should be able to do: e.g. of tasks assigned “to add two double-digit natural numbers”); (c) ‘manner’ (i.e. the manner or way of carrying out the assignment: e.g. “to work out the solution of the multiplication of a single digit number with a double-digit number by using a calculator”); (d) ‘condition’ (i.e. the conditions which must be satisfied for the task to be considered successfully implemented: e.g. “to draw a right angle (assignment) with the triangle of the drawing (manner) within ten seconds (condition). Some objectives do not necessarily specify the condition or the manner related to the learning that is to be attained.

transparent, and measurable<sup>17</sup>. This required a shift in the formulation of lesson plans, with objectives being written up in a simple way in order to facilitate evaluation as to whether or not they had been attained within the given timeframe.

Within the context of the pilot project, then, teachers were invited to work with a ‘standards-based’ or ‘objectives-based’ curriculum, starting their lesson plan in their professional diaries with the phrase: “At the end of this chapter the student will be able to...”<sup>18</sup> Teachers were also asked to formulate objectives not in a generic manner targeting ‘the whole class’ or the majority of pupils within it, but in such a way that they kept specific pupils and their learning needs in mind. In addition, teachers using the MNLO approach added a second section to their daily lesson plan in their diary, titled ‘reflection’. “What we do now,” said one teacher from Gjirokastër, “is to consider, after the lesson is over, which of the objectives set for the session were in fact reached, with who, and the reasons for any gap between what was planned, and what was achieved.”

### **Continuous monitoring of MNLO learning through ‘mini-tests’**

The writing up of MNLO’s was only the first step in the project’s attempt to ensure learning. The second step was to evaluate whether students had indeed assimilated the learning objectives. To facilitate this, the project proposed the notion of ‘mini-tests’, targeting the attainment of minimum objectives per textbook chapter, with the focus being on the

successful mastery of new concepts. Mini-tests involve a quick, three to five minute pause—often towards the end of a lesson—with teachers asking pupils to answer a very specific question linked to a chapter objective, thus demonstrating mastery of a particular element of knowledge or competence. Teachers were encouraged by project co-ordinators and trainers to divide students into ability groups, with mini-test questions focusing on the same learning objective, but at different levels of difficulty. In many of the lessons I observed, the results of the test were swiftly checked and students given instant feedback, with some of the pupils being called to the board to explain what they did. In this way, teachers have the opportunity to discuss results, clarify concepts, and either do further work with the individuals or groups themselves, or refer them to peer tutors if necessary.

Mini-tests therefore serve to generate an enhanced awareness of—as well as more targeted attention to—the progress and learning needs of individual pupils in the class. Mini-test results, for instance, are included in the individual portfolio of each student, with the teacher noting the percentage of correct answers overall, so that individual and class progress can be monitored. More detailed records are kept for weaker students, and learning achievement dossiers are supervised by the school Principal and his deputy, as well as by the inspector. All three use a judicious mix of inspection and support—what in the project is often referred to as ‘friendly talk’—using regular meetings with staff (on average, once every two weeks) as well as ‘open teaching periods’<sup>19</sup> in order to help teachers find the reasons behind the gap between targeted goal and attainment, to

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<sup>17</sup> One teacher gave a good example of the way she and her colleagues used to set objectives before and after training in the MNLO approach. Before they had aimed at goals which were somewhat vague, such as getting pupils to “read beautifully”. Now they articulate the objective differently, stating that they aim to have pupils read 80 words per minute, for instance.

<sup>18</sup> The focus was on the first cycle of the basic school (i.e. Grades 1 to 4), and on Math and Albanian language, where it was thought that the subjects lent themselves more easily to a ‘learning objective’ approach, and less likely to degenerate into a situation where teachers would be tempted to require students to learn the objectives by heart (as in history, for instance). In regard to the Albanian language, the focus was on the reading speed (the number of words that a pupil could read in a minute), the reading error rate (the percentage of words read incorrectly from a given paragraph), as well as on comprehension, spelling, and punctuation.

<sup>19</sup> These refer to the practice of having other colleagues as well as education officials attend a session led by a teacher in a school. The intention is to provide constructive feedback and mentoring, and the practice is current in all schools, as part of regular school activities.

develop strategies to close such gaps, and to share problems as well as good practices with other colleagues.

Such assessment strategies represent an important break in the teaching culture that traditionally prevails in Albanian schools, where teachers are not accustomed to systematic critical self-evaluation techniques, and where the established mind-set is that once the textbook knowledge is explained, the teacher's task is completed. Not only this, but mini-tests serve to keep the teachers' mind on learning outcomes, providing them with the data required to make sound decisions about planning for the next stages in instruction. They also should help identify patterns of achievement or underachievement according to the gender, ethnic or social class backgrounds of groups of students. Mini-tests encourage a more differentiated approach to teaching and learning, and open up new spaces and opportunities for students to express themselves and to participate in the lesson. From the classroom observations carried out, it was clear that in many of the pilot schools, mini-tests were becoming smoothly integrated in the flow of a typical lesson, with pupils welcoming the test, eager to have their results checked on the spot and to get results. Mini-tests also have value in producing a constant stream of indicators of learning, which are important not only for the teachers and pupils themselves, but are also easily transmitted to parents, who can thus keep abreast of the progress of their children.

## Supporting under-achieving students through peer tutoring

The project's concern with improving learning outcomes for all, and particularly for those most at risk, necessitated the development of strategies that support teachers in their attempt to cater for pupils who were having difficulties in mastering the MNLO. A key initiative here

was peer-to-peer learning support programmes. Two types of programmes were developed: 'patronage' groups<sup>20</sup> focused on support given between classmates on subjects in general, while senior student groups from the seventh and eighth Grade—often members of the Student Council—supported pupils in the younger grades in learning how to read. Each pilot school having a peer-tutoring programme assigned a teacher to co-ordinate the project, to prepare the young tutors for the mentoring they were to offer, to establish a monthly plan identifying MNLO's in reading, to maintain close contact with the tutees' regular teachers, and to provide them with any support they required when it came to teaching, including the use of appropriate pedagogical approaches. This was necessary because, as one teacher noted, problems did occasionally arise "because these young volunteer groups sometimes lack pedagogical tact... especially with pupils from the first Grade."<sup>†</sup>

Peer tutors were expected to work only with students who were experiencing difficulties in reaching the MNLO's, and to do so according to a working plan identifying the principles that were to be followed by every recruit. Such principles included the number of tutees per tutor (which was never to exceed three), where and when the tutoring would take place, and the resources needed (such as attractive books that would encourage poor readers to make additional efforts). School council members were to use their own initiative and creativity to design strategies and activities that would contribute to the attainment of the goals set out for peer tutoring, and to include these ideas in the strategic plan. They had to draw up a list of tutees that needed to be helped, on the basis of referrals made by teachers in the lower cycle, and to organise a roster with the help of the project co-ordinator. Finally, they had to learn how to monitor the progress achieved by each tutee, and to prepare a record of reading speed achievement over time, until MNLO

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<sup>20</sup> Initial reactions to the notion of 'patronage' were negative on the part of some parents and teachers, associating it with similar schemes in the communist past where students were obligated to care for their colleagues. One high-ranking education official recalled that he had been chosen to be such a peer tutor in the older patronage system, and that he had bad memories of it because he was always blamed by teachers and parents alike if his tutees did not do well! Such fears that peer learning was a throw-back to the past soon subsided, however, when the voluntary nature of the initiative was made clear, and when the first few experiences proved to be positive.

targets were reached. This could take anywhere between a few weeks to several months.

During the fieldwork, it became clear to me that this initiative had taken root in most of the pilot schools visited, with teachers and Principals being very proud of the work that the peer tutors and school council members were doing. Generally speaking, tutors met tutees in the morning, between shifts, or at the end of the school day. Initially some parents of student tutors were worried that the tutoring work would distract their children from their own study<sup>21</sup>. Others did not like the fact that their daughters had to leave early from home in order to help other students, or to arrive later than usual. † Parents of tutees were somewhat concerned that their children had been singled out for remedial work. Soon, however, parents of both tutors and tutees were expressing satisfaction with the programme wherever it was piloted, with interview data replete with comments about the extent to which tutees were making progress in learning. One parent, for instance, said that her son seemed to be getting more out of peer tutoring than the private lessons he had been following with a teacher after school hours. “My son asks more questions to his friend than to his teacher”, she noted. † Another thanked her son’s peer tutor telling her that “she had never seen him so interested in learning. He comes and wants to do his homework as soon as he enters. I am very satisfied and I like this to continue next year too.” † Such satisfaction reached a culmination in pilot schools that organised a ceremony at the end of the year in order to celebrate the achievements of tutees, and to publicly thank tutors who had generously given their time to the initiative. In such ceremonies, gifts are presented to both tutors and tutees, with books being offered by parents and the other members of the community.

## Community involvement in attaining learning objectives

It was frequently pointed out to me that community involvement at the school level

presented special difficulties for Albania, due to the association of parental and community collective action with the Communist past, and the enduring sentiment that the delivery of education services is the exclusive responsibility of the ‘provident state’—something the country shares with many of the Central and East European countries (Bassler, 2005). Parents tend to adopt a passive attitude marked by apathy, with the school, on its part, doing little to promote the feeling of partnership among parents, often dealing with them in a bureaucratic manner rather in ways that emphasise co-responsibility and co-operation. True enough, schools in Albania are required to have governing boards—but in most cases these have very little input in aspects of the school that have to do with teaching and learning, and as we have already noted, are rarely if ever consulted by Principals or teachers when it comes to devising the annual school plan, for instance.

The HDO initiative set out to challenge some of these attitudes and practices, convinced that, as experience world-wide has shown, communities can become a great resource in a resource-poor sector (Bray, 1995). Empty school libraries can be replenished with new and attractive books if each parent contributes the little he or she can, by donating money or a book per year. Schools can tap the wide range of talents in the community in order to have teams helping teachers prepare teaching aids, to produce plays at special events, or to cater for the specific needs of groups of students. Much of this community energy can be harnessed at little or no financial expense.

Maintaining its focus on improving achievement in math and reading, the project team invited pilot schools to identify adult volunteers who could help students in difficulty after school hours. In most cases, the choice fell on retired teachers who had both the time and the skills to be of service. These tutors were to develop specific programmes according to the guidelines established by the project team, and to set mini-tests which would be used regularly to track student progress. A modest payment

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<sup>21</sup> Time-tabling problems sometimes arose when the student tutor and the tutee attended different shifts. Schools generally tried to have tutors and tutees from the same neighbourhood, to cut down on the time needed for students to reach each other.

was offered to tutors as an incentive, but this depended on the extent to which the pupils under their care—usually not more than three—achieved concrete progress in their results. Part of this payment came directly from parents, in order to ensure interest and commitment on their part as well, and to stress that they too had responsibilities in the educational progress of their children. The parents' donation depended on their financial situation, and the money was managed and supplemented by the school board, which received seed funding from the HDO steering committee, as well as other donations from the community. The fact that parents and the wider community contributed to the initiative means that, in principle, the project could be sustained without long-term financial assistance.

Both the documentation made available by UNICEF, as well as the fieldwork indicate that this particular initiative was less successful than the peer learning one. Few of the persons interviewed referred to the adult volunteer initiative spontaneously, or offered vignettes to describe how the project had worked out. When prodded for reasons as to why this was the case, many pointed out the lack of a tradition of community-involvement in schools which militated against an enthusiastic take-up of the project. On the other hand, it must be noted that there were some signs of change. One Principal from Gjirokastër, for instance, noted that overall, the HDO project—and particularly the adult volunteer scheme—had helped to make the student “a focus for all community attention, and my teachers feel less on their own now”. The project had helped to make student achievement an issue for the community, and a good number of Principals and deputies noted that they could count on several people—including businessmen in the community—who were prepared to make donations in support of the schools' efforts to ensure that no child was left behind. Some donated gifts and books in order to reward those involved in the peer tutoring initiative, and in some contexts at least, the foundations for a change in the culture of community involvement in schools was being laid. Some schools in Korçë, for

instance, had started inviting those people who had made some commitment to the HDO goals to events that were organised to encourage and reward students that had made progress in reading and Math. These guests were given a place of honour, and in some cases they themselves presented gifts to tutees involved in the peer learning or adult volunteer schemes.

## Designing an annual school plan with learning objectives in mind

It is not only the teacher in the context of the classroom that has to keep focused on learning objectives. The school, under the leadership of the Principal, has to ensure that it too establishes clear learning outcomes for all its students, and to articulate them in such a way that progress in attaining them could be monitored. This requires a different way of drawing up the annual school plan, and makes new demands on the Principal who has traditionally seen himself as a government-appointed figure whose duties and responsibilities are largely bureaucratic in nature. As the third volume in the series of booklets published in the HDO project series notes, the deep-rooted mentality is that the main task of the Principal is to receive, understand, relay and enforce the orders coming from above—whether the authorities hail from the MoES, the municipality or the commune—and to ensure that teachers remain in line<sup>22</sup>. What the project booklet *The School Principal* proposes is quite different: here, the Principal is reconceptualised as an educational leader, on whose professional capacities much of the educational success of the school depends.

These professional capacities in many ways mirror those of the classroom teacher, for like the latter, the Principal is invited to identify objectives that are transparent, attainable and verifiable. This he or she has to do by consulting and working with all the stakeholders—be they teachers, students, parents or other members of the community in which the school is embedded—recognising them as active and responsible co-partners in the enterprise.

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<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the idea that the school Principal is a government-appointed official is so strong that one of the issues frequently raised during the interviews was that the appointment and removal of school heads depended on their political affiliations. This issue is dealt with in greater detail in Chapter 5.

The HDO project invites schools to first systematically take stock of where they are at, and to draw up a school profile by looking in particular at aspects related to student achievement (including such elements as attendance, learning achievement, and behaviour), and to the creation of an appropriate learning environment in the school (thus considering the role of the teacher, the family, and the community, and supportive infrastructure). It is on the basis of this analysis that specific objectives are then identified. Such objectives need to be made publicly visible and transparent, thus rendering the school accountable to those whose interests it claims to serve.

As with the case of the MNLO's developed for the classroom context, school development objectives have to be written up in such a way that they are susceptible to measurement and verification, thus further enhancing the accountability process. In other words, the school, under the leadership of the Principal, should be in a position to inform the community about real progress in attaining the learning objectives set. The school annual plan is therefore different from a strategic plan: while the latter is focused on the long- or medium-term (spanning a 3- to 5- year period, for instance), and its main concern is with general aims (such as 'improved reading skills by all students reaching the 5th Grade), the former focuses on the short-term (e.g. "This year students in the 4th Grade will..."), and its concern is with specific, challenging yet attainable (i.e. also taking into account the less achieving students) measurable objectives (e.g. "This year students in the 4th Grade will...attain a reading speed of 80 words per minute and an error rate of not more than 12%").

Needless to say, the articulation of such objectives requires a great many skills, and makes new demands on both teachers and Principals. They are required to work together so that all feel ownership of the plan, and commit themselves to it. The school also needs to have data on the basis of which it can plan objectives that are both challenging but attainable. In many cases, schools do have test results, but these remain in raw format, and have not been organised and analysed with a view to identifying patterns of achievement and strengths and weaknesses

in the learning process. An annual school plan focused on learning objectives requires such data processing, and the targeted and focused energy of the whole school community—including that of parents and students—on the problems identified.

While it is necessary to have general aims, which aims find an expression in specific objectives, it is even more necessary to translate objectives into action plans, i.e. strategies that will ensure the attainment of the objectives stated. The annual school plan in a school in Bilisht on the outskirts of Korçë, for instance, included a teacher training initiative (largely focusing on round table meetings between teachers of the same grades to discuss common problems, develop ideas for improving reading achievement, and sharing experiences in setting mini-tests), meeting with parents, and the enrichment of the school library. Strategies such as these have to be time-bound, with those who have the responsibility to implement the specific activities being identified. Here too the Principal has a leading role to play in identifying the most appropriate human and other resources that are available in the school, the community or beyond, and in stimulating enthusiasm and commitment on the part of all. The HDO project encouraged Principals to consider bringing on board people whom they had previously failed to consider as allies: these included senior students (who, as we have just seen above, could help junior pupils attain better results in reading, for instance), and members of the school board, the teachers' council, the student council, the parents' council, other members of the school community, as well as teachers from the same or from other schools (who could inspire their colleagues by sharing experiences).

Finally, the annual school plan should also include a monitoring plan as well, gauging, through regular, periodic analyses, the extent to which the objectives set are being effectively addressed, thus allowing the possibility for modifications and corrective measures to be implemented in time. An end-of-year evaluation takes stock of accomplishments, permitting a broader overview of where the plan was successfully implemented and where not, and what needs to be done to ensure greater success in the immediate future. Surveys

with students and teachers can contribute to a heightened awareness of the way the ‘end-users’ or ‘customers’ feel about the service they have been given, and the extent to which they feel that the engagements made have been respected<sup>23</sup>.

## Training in the use of the various strategies

All five tools and strategies have in common a rationality that entails clear articulation of what, in managerial literature, would be referred to as SMART goals—i.e. goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound. All five are underpinned by a concern—most often articulated by S.Llambiri—that goal-oriented and outcome-directed behaviour tended to be missing in Albania generally, and in the education sector more specifically. Several project documents indeed refer to the fact that one of the goals of the HDO initiative was to “model contemporary management styles, which, unfortunately, are very rarely to be found in our schools.”<sup>24</sup> Each of the five strategies used to implement the HDO project necessitated both changes in mentalities and in ways of going about doing things, as well as the building up of new sets of skills and competences.

The DoE Association and UNICEF invested heavily in training. Some of the notions and skills proved to be particularly difficult to integrate. Many teachers, Principals and deputies remarked, for instance, that the task of designing appropriate MNLO’s was not easy to master, as we shall have occasion to note in more detail in Chapter 5. The development of skills to write up an annual school plan also proved challenging, requiring did Principals to reconfigure their role away from the traditional, authoritarian figure-heads whose main task is to ensure that rules are followed, towards the adoption of a whole range of roles that includes

being a manager, a moderator, an evaluator, a monitor, and above all, a facilitator of school improvement. Such profound changes in roles do not come about easily, and indeed, several documents linked to the project refer to the difficulties encountered in encrusted attitudes that are bound to take years to transform, particularly given the fact that both teachers and Principals have to face a range of very different demands for which they have had little if any preparation.

The project strategy for training involved both the use of supportive professional literature—in particular the booklets that were prepared to form staff in relation to MNLO’s and mini-testing, to school planning, and to peer tutoring—as well as seminars and workshops. The concern here was to move away from the supply-driven model of in-service teacher training in Albania, where teachers are used to attending three to five days of training per year, with no verification as to whether those participating in the seminars actually did learn anything at all. The DoE Association’s commitment to outcome-based principles and to accountability led it to insist that teachers who attended its workshops sit a test. Those who did very well in the test were certified as ‘advisers on teaching-learning strategies with a focus on learning achievements’, and chosen as potential trainers of other teachers, thus becoming part of the change-agent teams that the Association used to ensure successful piloting of the initiative. These trainers of trainers received more intensive tutoring themselves, preparing them to be mentors to teachers and principals.

The model used in most of the project initiatives is based on what the project literature refers to ‘learning by doing with the assistance of a tutor’. This entails hands-on practice, with members of the change agent teams closely monitoring and providing assistance, as

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<sup>23</sup> The MoES has compiled a new standard template of the School Annual Plan, which builds on best international practice and on the experience gained in the implementation of the HDO project, reflecting the key principles outlined in the manual *The School Principal*, thus reinforcing and extending the impact of the work done by the DoE Association and UNICEF. The goal, therefore, is to promote a focus on pupils’ achievements and to facilitate the development of new managerial concepts that contribute to the realization of the plan. The intention is for the template to be implemented on a national basis in the future.

<sup>24</sup> DoE Association HDO Project circular carrying “Instructions on Students’ Government”.



well as modelling behaviour and attitudes. A further training strategy used by the DoE Association involved the sharing of good practice, both within and between schools. Project co-ordinators were keen to draw out the teacher from the almost-total autonomy and isolation of the class, rendering his or her work more open to both accountability, as well as to support. As Llambiri noted, “Your typical Albanian school is not a professional organisation, but a set of isolated professionals. Teachers do not share, communicate, or build on each other’s experiences. The only tradition we have is that of the formal meeting.” In an attempt to change this mentality, the project developed what it referred to as ‘parallel

training’. This could involve both structured sharing of good practice, or visits to schools which had had some success in increasing learning achievement, in order to examine first-hand the various elements that had contributed to that success. A promising initiative is the attempt to get teacher training faculties on board, in order to embed training in MNLO’s as a component of pre-service professional education. Three faculties—at the Universities of Korçë, Shkodër and Gjirokastër—accepted to include electives on the HDO phenomenon, signing a collaboration agreement with the DoE Association, and putting the manuals produced by the project on the reading list of student-teachers.

# Achievements and impact of the HDO project

In the next sections, we will consider the extent to which the HDO project, through its MNLO approach, succeeded in attaining the goals it set for itself. In addition, we will also consider the changes that it brought about in the pilot schools that it was active in. A word of caution would not be out of place here. It is a well-known fact that when describing human behaviour and what motivates it, it is very difficult to unequivocally establish causality with any degree of certainty. In other words, it is not easy to establish direct links between cause and effect, and to confidently claim that—in our case—the changes we are about to describe in the next sections are the sole responsibility of the HDO project. Social actors—including teachers, students, school Principals and parents—lead complex lives where behaviour, attitudes and beliefs can be shaped by several factors. Teachers, for instance, will have been exposed to some of the ideas and practices associated with the HDO project in other contexts, both in their pre-service and in-service training, and also as participants in other projects, such as the Global Education Initiative<sup>25</sup>, the Critical Thinking Programme, or the workshops organised by the Step-by-Step Association. Nevertheless, fieldwork data suggests that, as far as the interviewees were concerned, the HDO initiative had created a context and supplied a framework by means of which everyday realities that had to do with school life could be confronted. It had moreover provided them with the conceptual tools necessary to make sense of these realities, and to understand what needed to be changed. Most importantly, it had proposed practical strategies by means of which to bring about the required change so that ‘education for all’ would become more than just an abstract slogan.

With that cautionary note in mind, the following sections will consider six areas in which the HDO project has made an impact, namely:

1. Improved learning achievement
2. Valuing of transparency and accountability
3. Inspection visits based on ‘output-driven’ factors
4. Development of team-work among teachers
5. Increasing resort to differentiated teaching
6. Improved student collegiality

## Improved learning achievement

All studies carried out so far have indicated that a concerted effort on the part of the school and the community to make sure that all children remain engaged with schooling, as well as the focus on frequent and regular monitoring of the assimilation of MNLO, are having a positive outcome in learning achievement in the schools involved in the pilot project. The evidence is of both a qualitative and a quantitative nature. In respect to the former, all the interview data available—whether collected by the local consultant prior to my fieldwork, by the implementing organisation, or by myself—indicates that those involved in the piloting of the project—whether directors, inspectors, Principals, teachers, parents or students—held the initiative in high esteem, claiming that the approach it promoted had made a real difference in improving learning outcomes, and in attitudes to learning.

Many reported that weak students had improved self-confidence, given that their progress was monitored so carefully, and so much additional support was being offered to them. Such pupils became more motivated to work, thereby

<sup>25</sup> For an account of the Global Education initiative in Albania, see Ashton (2000).

halting and reversing the tendency to disengage from school, and to “fade out” prior to actually “dropping out” (Kelly & Gaskell, 1996). The project challenged teachers’ views about the learning capacity of pupils and, as a teacher from Gjirokastër noted, “We stopped using expressions like ‘Oh! That boy is a wooden head!’... Now we understand that he is part of the class.” Teachers became increasingly convinced that under-achieving students could learn if the instructional environment and pedagogy used were appropriate. They reported that they were less ready to reprimand, and to be “more supportive of those who try, even if they give the wrong answer.” Such qualitative evidence may at times verge on the anecdotal, and some of it may be attributed to the natural tendency for people to feel positively inclined towards projects that have provided them with opportunities for professional development, status, and even financial rewards. On the other hand, the fact that so much of the interview material as well as observational data are supportive of the initiative is a remarkable achievement, and reflects most positively on the project<sup>26</sup>.

Much of the quantitative, more measurable evidence is also positive, if somewhat in short supply. Several DoE Association documents,

including short reports about learning achievement gains in particular pilot schools, and short papers attached to project outlines or to funding bids, include results of tests completed by children who have been taught through the MNLO approach, compared to those who have not. By and large, all the quantitative studies carried out with point to the same conclusion, namely that there are less under-achievers—or hidden drop-out—in the former than in the latter group. A short report highlighting the results obtained at the end of the third phase of the project, for instance, states that 1000 low performing students had increased learning achievements in Math and Albanian language by 30% over the baseline. The most recent survey of achievement is equally positive. The survey, also carried out by the DoE Association, involved a test in MNLO’s in Albanian language and mathematics, undertaken by students who, at the beginning of the school year 2005-2006, started their fifth Grade, and who had been in project pilot schools the year before. Results were compared with a similar test developed during the school year 2003-2004 with students entering the same Grade, but who had not been involved in the project. The percentages below indicate the number of students who mastered the relevant minimum objective.

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<sup>26</sup> Positive feelings about the project were also evident when interviewees were asked to freely associate the initiative with an animal—and to then explain why they had chosen that particular animal. Teachers, supervisors of peer tutors, and Principals typically associated the project with an elephant (a big project, contains enough in itself, but allows you to touch it and is not aggressive), with being a mother bear (keeps the children warm) or a mother tiger (who does everything to protect her cubs), a lion (fast, clever and strong), a deer (because mini-tests have to be done in a very short time), a fox (intelligent and cunning), an eagle (keen eye-sight), a giraffe (you need to stretch to reach where you want to arrive), a monkey (most intelligent, will even climb on the giraffe to get what it wants in a high place), a rabbit (the project is soft and loving after you assimilate it), a chameleon (project offers many methods, and you need to be flexible to cater for every pupil), a canary (a familiar bird one keeps close to and listen to as it sings beautifully), a dog (loyal, easily adapted and tamed, learns tricks very fast), a dolphin (can be trained to jump and reach increasingly high levels). On their part, peer tutors and tutees involved in the project said that the latter made them think of a dog (makes me feel good, supported, confident), a bunny or a squirrel (fast, lively, goes everywhere, calm, quiet, small, very tame, somebody trembling and in need of support), a cat or kitten (small, likes to be caressed and taken care of).

Minimum necessary objective	% baseline	% project
<b>MATHEMATICS</b>		
1 Adding two natural numbers with up to five digits	78 %	92 %
2 Problem from children’s everyday life requiring students to add	80 %	91%
3 Subtracting two natural numbers up to five digits	43 %	72%
4 Problem from children’s everyday life requiring students to subtract	76%	89%
5 Multiplication of two natural numbers with up to four digits	31%	63%
6 Problem from children’s everyday life requiring students to multiply	44%	58%
7 Division of two natural numbers with up to four digits	32%	51%
8 Problem from children’s everyday life requiring students to divide	35%	46%
<b>ALBANIAN LANGUAGE</b>		
Reading comprehension*	62%	79%

*\*Note: These percentiles represent average results for the four reading comprehension tests that were set. In these tests, the students were given a short text to read, and then asked multiple-choice questions to measure comprehension.*

Despite these positive outcomes, the HDO project leaders are quick to point out that no rigorous comparisons have been made regarding students’ results between teachers who work with the MNLO approach and those who do not. Such rigorous surveys were beyond the capacities of the DoE Association, which felt that, in any case, international research has already given approaches focusing on mastery learning sufficient credibility. The indicators that the project produced—similar to the ones in the Table above—were considered to be sufficient for their purposes.

### Valuing of transparency and accountability

A further change that can be attributed to the HDO initiative is the reported shift, among those involved with the project, towards a mind-set that is more open to transparency and accountability. The articulation of MNLO’s—while “not the magic key” (MNLO Manual, 2004, p.22), helps to make the learning enterprise much more amenable to verification. The regular setting of ‘mini-tests’ draws the attention of the teacher—but also of pupils, their parents, and those whose responsibility it is to ensure that learning is taking place at the classroom level, such as school Principals,

inspectors, and regional directorates—to the extent to which the learning objectives have in fact been met.

Several noted that within the logic of learning achievement for all, teachers were spontaneously opening up to each other, and to the school Principal and inspector, openly expressing concern and asking for advice when MNLO’s were not reached. “It is surprising how transparent teachers have become towards each other and the directorate,” notes an article written in the teachers’ magazine by the Principal of a school in Bilisht and a regional inspector. “This is what happened with the teacher Vjollca when she developed a mini-test in math to check whether students had grasped the concept she had introduced—that is, division of numbers with zero in the middle. She came to my office with the results of the mini-tests, worried because of the poor results. Teacher Vjollca’s concern became the focus of discussion between colleagues who like her taught Grade 3 classes. Results were compared, and different ways of teaching the competence were suggested.” As the local consultant on the research mission noted, this was miles away from the previous monitoring model, where “the reports written by Principals and inspectors were very detailed and descriptive, not analytical at all, and often very negative—

to the extent that teachers dreaded a visit to their classroom.”

The school as a whole too becomes more transparent in relation to its achievements. Many of the schools visited displayed a chart on a notice board in the entrance hall, showing overall student progress in reading and math scores, often in relation to parallel Grades in other schools in the area. Similar charts were also displayed on walls in classrooms, though these focused on the students in that particular class. While, as we will note in the next chapter, several teachers, Principals, and some inspectors were somewhat wary of the potentially negative impact of such comparisons across Grades and across schools, rightly claiming that each context was different, with some classes and schools having a high percentage of students from challenging backgrounds, most nevertheless acknowledged the usefulness of benchmarking achievement with other schools in the area.

### Inspection visits based on ‘output-driven’ factors

One of the keys of a successful implementation of an initiative is that the different elements in such a complex activity as education complement and reinforce each other, rather than pull those involved in different, contradictory directions. Indeed, one of the challenges related to innovation—particularly at the piloting stages—relates to the fact that it is often difficult to change all aspects of the educational environment at the same time (Sultana, 2001). This often leads to a situation where some elements of school and classroom life maintain a traditional logic and philosophy while the logic and philosophy underpinning other has been modified or transformed by the innovation—in other words, there is a lack of congruence<sup>27</sup>. Often the assumption or hope is that, much in the same way as an ink-stain, the innovative styles will spread to all areas of the curriculum, especially if teachers find them more professionally sound and satisfying. On the other hand, several innovations have

founded precisely because the opposite happened.

HDO project co-ordinators seem to have had a sound awareness of this facet of educational innovation, and of the way change is difficult to bring about if the range of activities that typically constitute school life is not predicated on a similar set of shared values and principles. As has already been noted, the project touched various aspects of the educational environment, ensuring consistency in principles, focus and direction. HDO project leaders were also careful to target the whole range of stakeholders responsible for the delivery of educational services, from the top echelons of the Ministry and key departments at the MoES, to Regional Education Directors, inspectors, school Principals and teachers. Inspectors are an important link between the central and regional administrative levels, and the school. One Principal from Korçë, for instance, noted the damage that had been done in her school when teachers had adopted the MNLO approach, but the inspector seemed unaware of what this entailed, and started criticising teachers for implementing a strategy that he was not familiar with, and asking why they were not following the textbook religiously.

The situation has changed quite radically since then. Teachers are being encouraged to ask for support from the inspectorate when mini-test results indicate that the targeted pass rate has not been achieved. When inspectors and Principals<sup>28</sup> do visit classes, they focus on what is referred to as ‘the measurement of the period output’. Here, inspectors observe teachers teaching, and during the last five minutes of the session they set a mini-test to check the extent to which the lesson’s learning objective has been reached. Prior to doing this, the inspector asks the teacher to predict the success rate. The mini-test papers are then jointly marked by the teacher and the inspector, and the result confronted with the teacher’s estimate. This procedure has a number of implications: it first of all keeps the focus on learning; secondly, it provides a fairly objective indicator of

<sup>27</sup> One example of this is the fact that textbooks in use in most of the Grades in pilot schools were still overloaded and had unrealistic learning objectives, despite the fact that teachers using them were being expected to work within the logic of MNLO.

<sup>28</sup> Principals are expected to observe 5 to 6 lesson hours a week.

achievement, and thirdly, it opens up concrete opportunities for discussions about professional issues related to teaching and learning.

## Development of team work among teachers

As noted earlier, the exercise of devising the MNLO's was often considered to be quite challenging by teachers. There are several instances in the interview data from the fieldwork carried out in both Gjirokastrë and Korçë where teachers, Principals and inspectors spoke about their initial difficulties in understanding the concept and in developing objectives along the criteria set by the HDO project. Experienced teachers, for instance, expressed surprise at the fact that the process had not been as straightforward for them as they had expected it to be, with some failing to get a high mark when they sat for a test after the training they had received in the MNLO approach. Some reports noted that teachers felt pessimistic about the possibility of transforming the curriculum into MNLO's, considering the task tiring, and even impossible<sup>29</sup>. Others found the setting of mini-tests challenging, with some becoming obsessive about regular testing, and with testing beyond the focus of a chapter learning objective. Yet others felt somewhat daunted by the paperwork that the whole exercise entailed, even if the training accompanying the project implementation provided them with strategies to deal with it.

Such difficulties led teachers from parallel Grades to work together in teams so that together they could articulate MNLO's for a given Grade, and write up mini-tests, within the framework and guidelines provided by the National Institute of Pedagogical Sciences<sup>30</sup>. For most teachers, this was a new experience, and a very valuable one at that. In addition, the project required that a 'contract' be written up

between the teachers of the lower cycle and the those of the upper cycle, with the former committing themselves to ensuring that their pupils had mastered the minimum knowledge that was necessary to be able to benefit from the curriculum in the higher Grades. This not only entailed greater co-operation between teachers across the different Grades, but also helped to keep the focus firmly on learning outcomes, and to instil a greater sense of responsibility among teachers.

## Increasing resort to differentiated teaching

Albanian instructional settings are characterised by a 'one-size fits all' approach, where the notion of comprehensive education is only respected inasmuch as students, irrespective of their background or their learning profiles, abilities, and styles, are placed together in the same classroom, and hence not streamed or tracked. While there is plenty of evidence suggesting that 'streaming', 'tracking' and 'ability grouping' practices are detrimental to learning achievement for the academically able and less academically able student alike<sup>31</sup>, comprehensive schooling can only work well for both groups if teachers are sufficiently trained to cater for the different learning needs every student in their class. Heterogeneous grouping can only lead to major achievement gaps among students if those most in need of help are ignored, with the teacher focusing on the larger group of 'average' pupils. Indeed, this may go a long way in explaining why the difference between higher and lower achieving students in Albania is so high, leading one educator to exclaim that "our classrooms are characterised by polarity."

The whole MNLO approach is focused on the premise that all pupils must be actively included in the instructional setting. It requires

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<sup>29</sup> As reported in the article 'Experience from the HDO Project in the Low Cycle School of Bilisht', which appeared in the teachers' magazine *Mësuesi*. In this case, the school organised round tables with all the teachers from Grades 1 to 4, as well as round tables with teachers teaching parallel Grades.

<sup>30</sup> The Institute has now been divided into two semi-independent agencies, i.e. the Institute of Curricula and Standards, and the National Training and Qualification Centre of Education.

<sup>31</sup> Gamoran's research (2002) shows, for instance, that the achievement of less academically able students in homogeneous classes tends to be below that of their counterparts in heterogeneous classes. As the OECD PISA study has suggested, in those systems practicing ability grouping, differences in achievements of more and less academically able students increase throughout the years of schooling.

that every pupil has a set of minimum target achievements by which progress can be determined. Such close and targeted following of individual pupils is meant to ensure that none of the pupils reaching the end of their primary cycle have difficulties in mastery of basic competences. Group work, continuous assessment through mini-testing, peer tutoring and, in some cases, adult volunteer tutors, were the key strategies supporting the teacher in attaining this key objective.

While, as we will note in the chapter focusing on the challenges and difficulties related to the project, many of the teachers observed in the course of the fieldwork were still largely involved in whole-class teaching, all had taken up the practice of setting mini-tests which, while focusing on the topic under consideration during that particular period, had different levels of difficulty according to the perceived ability of students in different groups. In addition, the results of mini-tests were placed in an individual portfolio for each pupil. This was often a simple folder with the photo of the boy or girl on the front cover, and in the best of cases the different results were analysed and placed on a graph in order to track the learning progress of each individual pupil. This track record was checked by the school Principal and by the inspector, and also shared with parents from time to time. In some cases, teachers compared the results of the mini-tests across the same Grade, in an effort to benchmark achievement. Where pupils were failing to achieve targets, the teacher had to give an account of the reasons for this, and was encouraged to seek the support of colleagues—including teachers in charge of parallel grades, the Principal or Deputy, and the inspector—in order to find ways for the pupil to make progress.

Aspects of differentiated instruction also came through in relation to homework assignments. Project schools, in contrast to prevalent practice, no longer gave out the same homework to all the class, but, as with the mini-tests, set groups of pupils different tasks with variable conceptual

challenges, though these were all related to the same learning objective. For many teachers this was quite a change from the way they were used to setting homework, requiring the same kinds of skills that were needed to set mini-tests, so that training for the latter served them in good stead when dealing with the former.

## Improved student collegiality

The peer tutoring programmes put into place in the pilot schools appear to have brought about important changes in the dynamics between students. Students who accepted the responsibility to tutor their colleagues or pupils from the lower cycle invariably expressed pride at being involved in the project, as well as satisfaction with the outcomes. Initially, naturally, some of the peer tutors had felt anxious about whether their efforts would be welcomed by the tutees. During an interview held with a focus group in Korçë, one young lad recalled the first day he met the pupil assigned to his care. The latter had started crying, leaving the inexperienced tutor wondering what he could do to encourage the boy and put him at his ease. He had cracked a joke, thus breaking the ice, and winning the boy over. Another tutor said she would never forget the first moments at the start of her work with her tutees: “They didn’t come in time,” she said, “and they didn’t listen to us, they were very lively and even nagged each other constantly... and left their books at home!”†

But such difficulties were generally quickly overcome, with strong bonds developing between the older and younger pupils. All the peer tutors interviewed spoke warmly about their tutees, with many stating that the experience had led to lasting friendships, despite the difference in age. They spoke proudly and with excitement of the teaching strategies they were developing and using<sup>32</sup>, relishing the satisfaction they felt when they saw their tutees make progress in reading, for instance. “I was working as usual with Vasil,” said one student, “when suddenly he stopped

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<sup>32</sup> One student told us how she had decided to use an egg-timer to test the reading speed of a young learner. Another recalled how her tutee became interested in reading: “I was reading her a story about a lazy person, and I imitated the words that the lazy boy said. Elda liked this so much that she started to imitate him too. Since this happened, we began to role-read.”†

and started to laugh. I asked him what the matter was, and he, with a grin all over his face, said: 'I read it without making any mistake at all! I made it!' I felt so proud and so full of joy to share this happy moment with him!† Some kept checking on their tutees' progress, by asking their teacher about them, and whether they had maintained their reading skills in comparison to the rest of the class. For some, the experience was so positive that they felt that they wanted to take up teaching later on in life. All often acknowledged the help they got

from the teacher co-ordinating the peer-support initiative in their school, with whom a close bond was established.

Other than the positive impact that the peer teaching initiative had on learning, then, one should also highlight the additional and broader educational value of the project. Principals, teachers, parents and the pupils themselves reported an increase of the feeling of solidarity among the student corps, and an enhanced valuing of volunteer work.



# Challenges and issues for the HDO initiative

Innovations, whether in the education sector or elsewhere, operate in social fields marked by conflicting forces, where incertitude is the order of the day, and where the interplay of competing interests may not only block change but, perhaps more insidiously, absorb it and modify it in the image of the prevailing logic (Sultana, 2001a). There is therefore no linear and unproblematic progression between conception and execution when describing innovation and change, particularly in relation to education and schools, where a sensitivity to the history of the development of mass schooling alerts us to the ‘continuities’ rather than the ruptures in practice (Cuban, 1990), and where the tendency is overwhelmingly for systems to continuously talk about ‘change’, with classroom practice remaining remarkably the same. A forthright description of any innovation has to face up to the fact that school structures and cultures have robust ecologies that tend to see change as a ‘disturbance’ and ‘interruption’ of routinised behaviour, and that not only are contestation, resistance and accommodation understandable reactions, but that the school as an institution is more likely to change the incoming stimulus than the stimulus the institution. This is especially the case where innovations are the result of ‘forward mapping’ by local but distant policy-makers—or worse, by ‘dumb international consultants’ or donors<sup>33</sup>—rather than of ‘backward mapping’, where practitioners generate their own answers to their perceptions of challenges in context, and on the basis of which innovations and policies are then developed (Vandenbergh, 1988).

The following sections, then, outline some of the key challenges encountered in the

implementation of the HDO project. This is both to give a rounded, multi-dimensional and therefore more credible account of the project, and to also highlight lessons that can be learnt, and that can be of use in the overall effort to reform education in Albania. Ten key issues will be briefly sketched out in this context. Six of these challenges are endogenous to the initiative itself, while the remaining four are exogenous, i.e. related to the environment and context in which the initiative is embedded. Each of the following ten factors is considered in turn:

*(a) Endogenous factors:*

- Difficulties in catering for the learning needs of the whole range of pupils
- The fragmentary approach to knowledge underpinning the MNLO
- The importance of adopting a whole-school approach
- The dubious wisdom of ranking schools and classrooms
- The persistence of whole-class, traditional teaching styles
- The danger of stigmatising labels

*(b) Exogenous factors:*

- MoES commitment to the project
- Lack of connectivity between different educational reforms
- Political patronage
- Extrinsic motivators

The recommendations and way forward for the HDO project flow from a consideration of the above issues.

<sup>33</sup> As one of the interviewees referred to them tongue-in-cheek, undoubtedly including the present author in the tirade.

## [A] Endogenous challenges:

### *Difficulties in catering for the learning needs of the whole range of pupils*

The idea that all children not only have a right to learn, but that they are actually capable of learning represents a powerful challenge to deeply embedded notions about education in Albanian schools. We have noted the extent to which the HDO initiative has succeeded in disturbing the routinised life-world of teachers and Principals in the pilot schools, pushing them out of their comfort zones, and provoking them into re-considering and re-writing their roles in response to the moral imperative that lies at the heart of the teaching profession, which Dewey (1907, p.19) famously articulated as “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.”

Such changes did not just happen, of course. Interviewees who had been with the project from the start recall that initially, while the notion that there were hidden drop-outs in each and every class had caught on quite quickly, the idea that teachers could cater for all the children by working with MNLO’s was not taken seriously. In the initial stages of the project, teachers protested that it was not possible to guarantee learning outcomes for all children, given that some had serious cognitive limitations, while others came from very deprived and even dysfunctional backgrounds and contexts. As one teacher from Bilisht said, “Sometimes we felt helpless: how could we possibly teach MNLO’s to kids who are mentally handicapped, or to some of the Roma and Evgjit children with all their problems, and to emigrants coming back from Greece, and who hardly spoke a word of Albanian?!”

A related resistance to the MNLO approach focused on the other end of the ability continuum of students—the more gifted ones. Several interviewees—including parents, teachers, Principals, Deputies, inspectors and high-

ranking MoES officials—expressed a concern that the project’s focus on the minimal learning objectives could lead to the ‘lowest common denominator’ effect<sup>34</sup>. In other words, while in theory teachers were encouraged to work at at least three levels (i.e. keeping in mind minimal, median and extended competences in relation to the same objective), thus ensuring differentiated learning in a mixed ability class, it was feared that in practice things would work out quite differently, with teachers’ energies and attentions being absorbed by the more needy students. Such a concern was not unfounded. Teachers themselves admitted that “at first, we fell into the trap of not taking care of the good students... But even they need special attention, and we had to learn how to assign them complementary work and more challenging homework tasks.”

Classroom observations also suggested that while some of the more experienced and expert teachers had developed the skills to handle differentiated teaching, others were struggling. Indeed, many initially found the concept and skills involved in transforming chapters into learning objectives that were suitable for the different pupils not only challenging intellectually, besides requiring a lot of extra effort and paperwork. “The MNLO was too difficult”, said a group of teachers in Gjirokastër, “and at first we almost gave up.” Another made everybody roar with laughter when she said that, after failing the test she sat for following training in designing MNLO’s, she felt that she was the ‘hidden drop-out’ in her school! In a series of joint observation sessions with the Director of the National Training and Qualifications Centre in schools in Gjirokastër, the latter official referred to Bloom’s taxonomy noting that many of the teachers she had seen were so focused on minimal objectives that, in most cases, they were not stretching the more able students. Deputies and Principals made much the same comment during a focus interview in the same town, though some also insisted that “We do not sacrifice excellence: some of our math students get prizes at national and Balkan Olympiads, and we are very proud of that.”

<sup>34</sup> Research suggests that the achievement of more able students in homogeneous classes tend to be either similar to (Slavin, 1987) or higher than (Kulik & Kulik, 1988) that of more academically able students in heterogeneous classes.

It is to the credit of the project leaders that they continued working with teachers and Principals in addressing these difficulties, acknowledging the challenges that the project entailed, providing support, training, and even financial incentives to make sure that participants in the project schools ‘walked the walk’. Rather than giving up on teachers, they considered the fact that they were becoming concerned about whether the approach would work with all students a positive factor—as Llambiri said, “at least, despite the protests, they were now thinking of all the students, and not just the ones who they usually worked with.” It was pointed out that before moving on to higher levels of thinking and of content mastery, the basics had to be learnt by all. Survey results were used to good effect to show that even those students that teachers taught of as high achievers also had difficulties with grasping minimum objectives, and that therefore the MNLO approach was valid for them as well, with wise teachers making sure that they had consolidated the first floor before, as the Manual states, “moving on to build the second floor of the house.”

In the mind of Llambiri, the turn-around came when teachers and Principals became increasingly convinced that, despite the difficulties and challenges, this approach was educationally sound, and when they therefore started asking for help to implement it. As Guskey (1986) notes, significant changes in the beliefs, attitudes and practices of teachers will only come about if they are persuaded that such changes will have a positive impact on students’ learning. Such ‘significant changes’ were apparent in many of the interviews carried out during the course of the fieldwork. Teachers who had previously been sceptical were claiming that not only had the project helped in identifying the problem, but that it had proposed practical solutions to it. Many drew comparisons between the HDO project and others that they had been involved in. Korçë teachers noted that the latter had tended to focus on material things and resources—which were often badly needed, but which, unlike the MNLO approach, failed to focus on the essential, i.e. learning achievement. Many felt that none of the projects had matched the seriousness with which the HDO phenomenon had been tackled, commenting about the high

level of training, and the fact that each step of the way had been buttressed by research and careful analysis. Several expressed pride that the HDO initiative “came from one of us”, and as one Deputy Principal from Gjirokaštër noted, “this made me feel good... With other projects I tended to feel insulted by the way we were treated, as if we did not know anything... In this case, it was an echo of our everyday concerns.”

Stories were told of what were affectionately referred to as ‘hidden heroes’ in what was for them the ‘hidden drop-out saga’: educators who struggled against the odds to make a positive difference to children’s lives. I had the privilege of meeting several of these ‘heroes’—teachers and Principals who are a credit to the profession. In one case, for instance, a Principal in a remote village outside Gjirokaštër broke down with emotion when he recalled the progress made by pupils who had previously been largely ignored. He spoke about the gratitude of their parents, and about the pride of teachers and the community in the school, where he felt they had succeeded in creating a partnership that worked for children—many of whom were obviously indigent, and some of whom had to walk five kilometres daily to get to their class.

## **The fragmentary approach to knowledge underpinning the MNLO**

A challenge that the project may need to overcome is one that is often associated with competence-based approaches to the curriculum. In such approaches, there is a tendency for knowledge to be ‘reduced’ to specific learning objectives which, while helping to identify discrete elements that need to be taught, and while facilitating assessment of mastery, can lead to missing the wood for the trees.

Competence-based learning works best when teachers are sufficiently skilled in their work to continually stress “the overall structure of the learning unit and each lesson placed within it. Connections between lessons enable students to see learning as part of a unified whole rather than as a series of isolated,

discrete pieces” (Anderson, 2004, p.84). This is because “networks of connected knowledge structured around powerful ideas are more likely to be understood, remembered and used in new situations than are disconnected bits of information” (ibid., p.85).

The fieldwork carried out was not extensive enough to enable evaluation of this aspect of the MNLO with any degree of certainty, particularly as teachers were only observed leading one lesson in isolation from the rest of a learning unit. However, on the basis of what was observed in classroom, it is legitimate to at least raise the question as to whether or not the MNLO is promoting a fragmented rather than a holistic approach to knowledge. This is even more necessary when one considers the fact that the primary curriculum is very much subject-rather than theme-based, with the school bell ringing to mark the switch from one subject to another, and with integrative approaches being the exception rather than the rule. In such an environment, it is critical for teachers to see the relationship between objectives, learning units and courses, and the influence of each one on the others, and to also help students make these connections. That some were struggling with this task became clear when teachers seemed to be more prone to set mini-tests for lesson rather than for chapter learning objectives, as they had been instructed to do.

### **The importance of adopting a whole-school approach**

Another aspect of fragmentation in relation to this project—and one common to many initiatives in the piloting stage—is the fact that the HDO initiative targeted only the first cycle of the primary school, and then only two subjects from the programme of that cycle. While this is understandable given the human and material resources available, and the choice of only Math and Albanian was based on carefully thought-through reasons, the fact remains that this did create some issues for teachers and schools. Principals and their deputies noted that there was a need to transfer the same approach to other subjects, as teachers could not be expected to work with contrasting—indeed even contradictory—

educational approaches, depending on the subject they taught. If they were persuaded that the MNLO approach was a correct one, and enhanced learning achievement, then it was natural that they would want to apply it across the board. There was also the difficulty of having teachers collaborate with each other across the different Grades, if those from Grade 5 onwards had had no experience with, or training in the MNLO approach. This was particularly critical in relation to this project, given that one important aspect involved the expansion of objective-based strategies to the management of the school’s annual plan, and to its implementation.

Clearly, the DoE Association’s goal was to introduce the MNLO approach as a Trojan horse in the system so that, like a virus or an ink stain, it spread out and influence other elements of the educational enterprise. Project leaders cannot be faulted for starting small without, however, losing sight of the larger picture. The question does need to be raised whether, on the other hand, a whole school approach would not have been more appropriate to avoid discontinuities of practice within the same organisation. A rapid pace in systematic implementation across the board can minimise the dangers associated with a piecemeal approach to reform, and indeed, the intention is to move beyond the low to the second cycle (where the focus will be on Math and Science), on to the general high school, and then finally to all school levels across all subjects. To maintain this momentum, however, requires a major commitment by the MoES, and that, as we shall note in a section below, is still in question.

### **The dubious wisdom of ranking schools and classrooms**

In an earlier section we noted the claim made by several teachers and Principals that the students they catered for often came from backgrounds where economic, cultural, gender, lifestyle and ethnic group realities seriously impeded their efforts to attain learning objectives. On their part, HDO project co-ordinators, while sensitive to issues connecting deprivation to achievement, tended to be somewhat wary

of such arguments, considering that this let teachers and schools ‘off the hook’ too easily. In other words, while the first tended to blame pupils and their backgrounds, the second tended to blame teachers and schools. As suggested earlier, the ‘truth’ probably lies somewhere in between, where several factors combine resulting in the gradual disengagement of the pupil.

This delicate balance of views is critical to the policies that are pursued in order to assure quality education for all. Dominant ‘neo-liberal’ approaches to education tend to construct students and their parents as ‘clients’ or ‘customers’ who have rights in relation to the service that they are receiving. They tend to promote the persuasion that schools can compete successfully irrespective of the nature of school intake, and the conviction that raising educational standards for all is largely a question of effective school management and quality teaching. Issues linked to the different social, economic and cultural capital that students bring with them to the school and learning context tend to be downplayed, if not completely ignored. Educators inspired by neo-liberal perspectives are generally convinced that a teacher’s worth is to be measured by his or her ability to deliver good student results. Here, the promise of rewards and differential remuneration on the one hand, and the threat of dismissal on the other is brought into play depending on whether the class and the school obtains good results in a sort of ‘league table’ that pits educational communities against each other (Bates, 2004). Appeals to ‘standards’ justify the intensification of school and teacher testing, leading to increased surveillance and control on the part of the state and/or education authorities in what has been termed ‘the age of standards’ (Roth, 1996).

There is something of this flavour in the DoE Association’s approach to education which needs to be problematised. It is clear, for instance, that the Association’s concern with transparency is ideologically deeply rooted, and was explicitly articulated by its director in such a way as to highlight the contrast with previous political regimes, where data was not only hidden, but also often fabricated. While there is a sense of uprightness in ensuring that student progress—or lack of it—is clearly

visible to all, and that, as the saying goes, ‘the buck does stop’ somewhere and with someone, education is somewhat more complex a process than a supermarket good. There is international evidence suggesting that intensive systems of teacher and school accountability through—among other methods—comparison of results of student achievement—lead to the focusing of effort and resources on those pupils that are more likely to succeed instead of those who most need it, to teaching for success in tests, to the breakdown of collegial relations between staff, to increased bureaucracy and paperwork, to rule-following behaviour, and ultimately to demoralisation and even abandonment of the profession (Goldstein, 1997; Apple, 1999; Fiske & Ladd, 2000). The public naming (and consequent and inevitable shaming) of schools in regional and national league tables has had a similarly dramatic effect on systems in several countries, and places where such practices have been in place for a decade and more—such as Wales, New South Wales and Northern Ireland—have in fact now changed their mind about their educational value and abolished them.

While there is no evidence from the fieldwork that the schools and teachers piloting the HDO project have suffered any major ill-effects due to the intensified accountability measures, and the constant testing and benchmarking (against results achieved within and across Grades, and within and across schools, at district—and eventually at regional levels), a note of caution needs to be sounded, particularly in a country where, as noted in the introductory chapter, regional disparities are very wide indeed. Deputy Principals from Gjirokastër, for instance, said that they had noticed some teachers developing feelings of jealousy towards colleagues whose classes had achieved higher scores than theirs. A Principal from Korçë spoke of her school, saying that it was one thing to speak of achievement for all, and another thing to implement such lofty goals in a context where a third of the students were from highly marginalised and vulnerable Roma and Evgjit backgrounds. As another Principal from the same town said, “the dropping-out phenomenon does not start in the school, but in the family. Some come from families with dramatic financial and social difficulties. Many

of our children have no parents to speak of, since these have left them with grandparents or other members of the extended family so that they could go abroad to find work.” She declared herself squarely against comparison between schools, as did one of the project co-ordinators, despite her total commitment to the project.

The DoE Association is clearly aware of the complex issues and minefields involved in comparing school performance on the basis of student results. In one of its information sheets the Association correctly notes that comparisons of learning achievement are difficult because “The student’s results are multifactor ones and some of them are beyond the teacher and the school.” The challenge then is that of finding the happy medium between ensuring transparency and accountability on the one hand, while on the other acknowledging that ‘school effects’ cannot ever hope to completely address injustices that have their origins elsewhere, i.e. in the way resources, power and life-chances are allocated and distributed in Albanian society.

### **Persistence of whole-class, traditional teaching styles**

Another key concern with the HDO initiative is the extent to which it has had an impact on changing the teacher-centred pedagogy prevalent in Albanian schools. While, as we have noted, the initiative has had a strong impact on several aspects of school life, most of the evidence available suggests that it has had less of an impact on the pedagogy that teachers employ in the classroom.

In a way, given the whole rationale and logic underpinning the project, this is not surprising. In interviews with the DoE Association director, statements were made regarding the fact that the focus of the project was not on the means (teacher and school ‘inputs’) but on the ends (learning achievements). This focus is echoed in several of the publications and materials linked the project. Principals and inspectors are, for instance, taken to task for giving too much attention to teacher and student activities, rather than to student learning when they visit classrooms to evaluate teaching. This is not

because the project is insensitive to pedagogy, but because it did not target pedagogy in a direct manner. As Llambiri noted in a clarificatory note to the present author, in the case of Principals, the project had provided training in developing objectives and methods for implementing them through an annual school plan and for monitoring/evaluating such implementation. In the case of teachers, however, the project had not aimed “to teach teachers how to achieve these chapter objectives, but how to design them correctly and how to evaluate their accomplishment.” For Llambiri, then, the key target consisted in shifting the teachers’ focus away from the textbook to outcomes. This, he was convinced, was a necessary if intermediate step to student-centred learning. The more teachers became focused on learning achievement, the more they would feel impelled to draw on student-centred strategies, and in relation to that, there were “a large number of techniques and approaches that have been on the market for years.” The UNICEF education programme officer corroborated this position, stating that “Teachers are getting the child-centred approach through Step-by-Step, Global Education, Critical Thinking, and so on.”

In many ways, this approach is defensible. It does in fact seem that many of the teachers and Principals involved in the piloting of the HDO initiative had taken part in other projects, where they had received training in child-centred pedagogy. Co-ordinators of other initiatives referred gifted teachers to the DoE Association, recommending them on the basis of their performance in other projects. Two of the teachers observed teaching in their classroom—and one of these was team-teaching with a colleague of hers—had been trained in Step-by-Step methods. Quite a few teachers and Principals referred to Global Education and Critical Thinking, with two MoES officials even expressing a concern that piloting of initiatives in Albania has tended to be always done with the same schools and with the same teachers (often the better ones to ensure success). Their justified worry was that this tended to lead to a situation where the same people were receiving a lot of training through the many projects they took part in, while other schools had very little in comparison. Of course, the advantage was that presumably teachers could draw on the different approaches in an

incremental and cumulative way. Clearly, for the more expert teachers, this was happening. As one Principal noted in an interview: “What we are aiming for cannot be reached through traditional methods...You cannot teach in differentiated ways without using group work, and you cannot work individually with pupils unless you know them well, have respect for them, and use participatory methods.” Quoting Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, he added “When Alice got lost in a dark tunnel, and she asked the Cat which turning to take, the answer was: ‘It all depends where you want to go!’... And that’s right of course...we know where we want to go: it just about taking the turn that leads us there now.”

The problem is, however, that outside of ‘Wonderland’, there may very well be several tunnels that can take a person to the same destination. In other words, it is possible to imagine teachers focusing on—and achieving—learning outcomes, but using methods that are traditional and teacher-centred<sup>35</sup>. Classroom observation data suggest that while some of the teachers who had been involved in other projects—and most notably in the ‘Step-by-Step’ approach—were drawing on the training that they had received in order to shape the focus on learning achievement in ways that stressed participatory, learning-by-doing, child-centred approaches, others were not. One of the ‘instructions’ outlining issues to be taken into account by schools disseminating the MNLO experience in fact noted: “Some experimenting teachers, despite having designed the MNLO list per chapter, and having regularly developed the mini-tests, have not managed to reduce the hidden dropout rate. This has occurred because they have done all this only to be in line with the requirements of the project, without changing anything in their teaching. It’s impossible to dictate such changes. Only the teacher knows what she must change so as to reach MNLO with almost all her students.”

An inspector accompanying us during some of the visits agreed with my view that while the minimal learning objectives were indeed being reached, the methodology was largely traditional, what she termed “the ping-pong way of teaching from the past.” Indeed, of the 10 classes observed, eight shared much the same characteristics, namely:

- Lessons consisted largely of ‘listen segments’;
- When lessons had ‘work segments’, these were set and tightly orchestrated by the teacher, and the pattern generally was listen-listen-listen-work (with some work spilling over into home assignments);
- Lessons were mostly addressed to the whole class, though differentiation did occur in some cases during the setting of mini-tests;
- When the teacher worked with individual students (often completing an exercise on the blackboard), the rest of the class either observed, or waited its turn;
- Even when some classrooms were ‘staged’ in groups, the work segments were done on an individual basis;
- The verbal interaction in the class generally followed the same pattern: tell-ask-answer-react (to the answers)—hence the aptly called ‘ping-pong’ approach;
- Questions, though well distributed among most (and occasionally all) students, were generally asked by the teacher, and answered by the pupils;
- Questions often required responses that instigated pupils to recall, to understand and to apply, rather than to analyse, to evaluate and to create;
- Most (and occasionally all) the interaction was teacher-to-pupil/s; and pupil/s-to-teacher, not student-to-student;
- In most cases, teachers remained in their traditional ‘territory’, next to the blackboard;
- Few used show-and-tell strategies, resorting

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<sup>35</sup> In the worst of cases, teachers can also get targeted results—which may in themselves be praiseworthy—by using methods that are either not commendable, or worse, that are unethical. Students, for instance, can be pressured and bullied into working long hours, for instance, and several regimes have organised their education systems in such a way that they attained very high standards of achievement, but at the cost of putting children’s rights and dignity in jeopardy. I hasten to add that at no stage during my classroom and school visits did I observe behaviour which was unethical. I am merely highlighting the pedagogical scenario to point out that the process of education is at least as important as the outcomes, which is why UNICEF, among others, has worked hard to implement the concept of child-friendly school environments. This is recognised to be particularly important in the primary years, but of course beyond as well.

- to visual resources, whether commercially produced or home-made;
- Few used music, role play, the plastic arts, or hands-on activities;
- Teachers (and to some extent students) had a high time-on-task focus, emphasising the academic rather than the social or the recreational;
- Classroom behaviour was tightly scripted, with rule-following behaviour being emphasised;
- Subjects are clearly delineated, with the school bell marking change in lesson, indicating that an integrated approach has not been adopted.

This does not mean that the teachers were not effective, or uncommitted. Within the logic of this form of teaching, teachers were generally very well-prepared, caring, courteous and respectful with the pupils, diligent and on-task throughout the session, attentive to difference, and quick to smile and to praise—a certain improvement on much of the teaching that I was told prevails in the country. They knew the children by name, made every effort to ensure that each individual felt included in the lesson, and like the pupils, withstood the chilly, somewhat crowded and spartan environment of the classroom stoically and at times even cheerfully. They were obviously proud of their work, and of the progress in achievement that some pupils were making under their tutelage, pointing out to portfolios and to progress charts to all of us visitors in their classrooms. But this is not the joyful teaching that contemporary educators would associate with primary-level schooling, and indeed, there was very little if any difference between these teachers and the one we saw in a non-project class in Tirana, in as far as the pedagogy is concerned<sup>36</sup>. The contrast came out with the two teachers who, thanks to their training in the Step-by-Step programme, were able to bridge the HDO concerns with achievement with a more

playful, child-friendly, interactive and cheerful pedagogy. In this case the classes came alive, with singing, clapping, group interaction, role play, open discussion, peer teaching, co-operative learning—one and all put at the service of attaining the learning objectives, but in ways that seem to me to be somewhat more appropriate for the early Grades of primary schooling. Given the importance that the revitalisation of teaching methods has been given in the National Education Strategy, and with the Ministry investing so much of its in-service training efforts to promote child-centred approaches, it is critical for the HDO initiative to ensure that its goals, and the means to achieve those goals, work in the direction both of national aspirations, and in the direction of enlightened primary education<sup>37</sup>.

### The danger of stigmatising labels

A cautionary note must be sounded about the use of the term ‘hidden drop-out’ in the project. While, as we have noted, the term served as a powerful metaphor to draw attention and give visibility to an otherwise ignored phenomenon, fieldnote data suggest that there may be an unintended consequence that the project would do well to consider. Staff frequently referred to specific students as “hidden drop-outs”, or a particular class as having “many hidden-drop outs”. Peer tutors asked the head for the key to the “hidden drop-out room” † where they could meet their tutees. Inspectors spoke of specific schools as being filled with “hidden drop-out cases”.

While interviewees denied that they ever used the HDO term in front of children, and the DoE Association publications are careful to refer to target pupils as “students with relative learning difficulties”, evidence collected by the implementing NGO indicates that children and

<sup>36</sup> In one case, for instance, one of the teachers even insisted that the children cross their hands and purse their lips throughout much of the lesson, so that, presumably, she could better explain the concepts she was trying to get across. The mottos on a banner for two other classes observed in Korçë also capture the overall mood: “A lot of work but few words!” admonished one, while the other advised: “Don’t brag about yourself, but put your head down and listen to what others are telling you!” A bill of children’s rights was pasted on the wall next to these mottos, as it was in practically all the classes visited. The irony seems to have been lost on the teachers.

<sup>37</sup> The National Training and Qualifications Centre is currently planning a five-module set of courses focusing on learner-centred pedagogies.



parents were acutely aware of the label. This was especially the case with peer mentoring, where being chosen to be helped by peer tutors or by members of the Student Council served to highlight the fact that a pupil was weak. Even if, as some teachers from Bilisht said, pupils generally know where they stand and are able “to make a very realistic assessment of themselves”, being singled out for attention—even if, as teachers noted, this was to make the hidden drop-out children “stars for the day”—can be counterproductive. A teacher from Korçë noted that she had encountered two or three cases where the tutees “had lost their pride... They looked spiritually hurt in front of their friends.”† Indeed, teachers and Principals noted that on occasion parents called at the school claiming that their children did not need extra help, and that they were doing fine on their own. In one case, parents complained when their children appeared in photos illustrating an information brochure on peer learning and the HDO project. As one parent said, “At the beginning I didn’t like this [peer tutoring] at all. My son got isolated from the others and his friends often teased him: ‘You’re a failure!’ they told him... ‘You’re not good!’... My son was upset and cried.”† Another parent recalled how her son had felt hurt when classmates in the same apartment building they lived in teased him about “needing help from others with your lessons.”†

In cases such as these, students may very well have preferred to have remained ‘hidden’, rather than to be given visibility in ways that hurt their feelings, their pride and their dignity.

## **[B] Exogenous challenges:**

The issues raised in the section above can all be said to be linked to factors that are internal to the initiative itself. There are a number of other factors over which the project had little if any control, and which are related to the environment and context in which the initiative is embedded. It is to a consideration of these that we now turn.

## **MoES commitment to the HDO project**

There is little doubt that the HDO project had made a name for itself within the MoES. This, after all, was a project that was led by a highly respected educator, who, besides the usual academic credentials, occupied a position of influence at the Ministry (where he had been Director of the Institute of Pedagogical Studies, and where he was now personal adviser to the Minister), with key donors and international organisations (who often chose him as consulting expert), and with practitioners at the chalk face (as we have seen). The project’s legitimacy and credibility was further enhanced by the financial and technical support it enjoyed from UNICEF, and by the positive impact it seemed to be having at the level of classrooms, schools and community. Many of the Ministry officials who were interviewed noted that one of the project’s strengths was its ability to address holistically several issues that were high on the policy agenda, and not just a single problem or a single level of the interlocking network of factors that, as Eisner (2000) would argue, need to be collectively addressed if schools are to improve in significant ways.

At one level, then, it would be easy for the Ministry and the government to claim that they have given wholehearted support to the HDO project. References to hidden drop-outs were made at the highest level by the former Prime Minister in the Government Annual Review for 2004. The MoES has repeatedly sounded concern about the marginalization of pupils in a number of key documents, such as the extended version of the National Strategy for Social Economic Development and the EFA/Fast Track Initiative proposal. It has included the goal of eliminating the HDO phenomenon in its annual work plan, and requested that supplementary sessions be organised across the whole country by tutor teachers with students who had either dropped out of school, or were in danger of doing so, and who had learning difficulties. It has developed a standard format for the School Annual Plan largely based on

the outcome-oriented principles underpinning the MNLO approach. At the regional level in particular, and especially with those directors and inspectors who had been involved in training, the commitment to the project was unswerving, as both fieldwork data suggests, and the many circulars issued by them to schools under their care show. The National Centre for Training and Qualification of the Ministry has been especially supportive of the HDO initiative, and has planned to integrate the HDO project experience in its national plans.

And yet, both UNICEF and DoE as implementing association were not quite convinced that the Ministry was backing the project to the extent required if this was to go to scale, and to develop from a pilot initiative to a fully-fledged national one. Senior staff in central education departments themselves claimed that they were simply overwhelmed by too many reforms and changes taking place at the same time, and that in fact the shortfall in meeting expectations lay in governance issues. They felt that they were often reduced to dealing with day-to-day urgent requests, and to crisis-management. In addition, they wanted clear proof that learning achievement had in fact increased in schools associated with the project in the pilot phase.

Others felt that the real reason for the prevarication lay in the fact that MoES officials were still largely entrenched in old ways of doing things, seeing themselves more as servants of the state—hence a link in the chain of a bureaucracy, waiting for orders to come from above—rather than as leaders co-responsible for the articulation and implementation of an educational vision. They were therefore prone to adopting a somewhat passive attitude, accepting ideas but dedicating minimum effort, failing to invest themselves personally or professionally in an initiative. Project leaders in fact noted that while teachers, Principals, inspectors and regional directors were often keen to make suggestions to ensure successful implementation of the initiative, such proposals were rarely if ever received from the Ministry.

Those who had committed themselves to the project at regional and school level were keenly aware that unless the MoES was four square behind the initiative, the chances of going to scale would be compromised. There was the general feeling among those funding, driving and implementing the project that their work had reached a stage where the government had to take ownership of the initiative: they had done their part by identifying the problem and articulating a response to it. They had sown the seeds, contributed technical expertise as well as resources, and made sure that new attitudes and practices were well rooted in a number of school communities. Some indeed felt that in a way, the high degree of commitment and success of the pilot project was working against them. As one local project co-ordinator noted, “It is tempting for the Ministry to ignore us: they might actually be saying: ‘They are doing so well without our assistance, we might as well let them be... we have enough on our plate as it is!’... They should show more serious attention, and not just come to our schools to see if there are cobwebs on our walls!”

The Ministry was therefore criticised for failing to give the initiative the serious attention it deserved, for not sufficiently promoting the project nation-wide through the media, and for not taking a lead role in the comprehensive training of Principals and teachers and in extending capacity-building to a national scale in order to ensure the availability of a critical mass of change agents. As noted earlier, it is indispensable to maintain a good pace in the change process, in order to avoid fragmentation and discontinuities in the reform triggered off by a pilot initiative. There was therefore a need to see the MoES own the set of experiences and techniques that had been developed, to enrich the methodologies that had been trialled out, and to extend the project across all Grades and all curricular areas. In other words, project leaders felt that the Ministry should more effectively mobilise its energies and resources to ensure the follow-through stage, which they remained committed to supporting. As one ex-regional director noted, “the Ministry must now become the lead partner. There must be

an official directive from the Ministry showing that it has taken ownership and responsibility... unless this happens, despite our wishes to implement, we will not get there.”<sup>38</sup>

## Lack of connectivity between different educational reforms

Two other aspects linked to the Ministry and which have an impact on the successful implementation or otherwise of the project deserve to be highlighted. The first concerns the fragmented approach to educational reform in Albania. We have already noted that the sheer scope of the reforms has led to a situation where the Ministry is finding it difficult to juggle all the balls at the same time. In addition to that, it was also obvious that lack of co-ordination between Ministries and departments, as well as between international donors and organisations, often meant that the left hand did not quite know what the right hand was doing, and one initiative did not feed into and consolidate the other<sup>39</sup>. While teachers were expected to draw holistically on the training received through their involvement in different projects, that same integrative approach was not modelled by those in charge of the overall management of the education system. Thus, HDO project partners were understandably dismayed when they discovered that the new manual that had been developed for inspectors by the Ministry with the support of ‘Save the Children’ failed to build on the notion of learning objectives, and to explicitly connect with the rationale underpinning the new approach to the Annual School Plan.

As one interviewee aptly put it, “In the education scene in Albania, we have a lot of pieces, creating a mosaic. But a mosaic is supposed to form a picture, while in this country that picture never seems to take shape.”

## Political patronage

A further exogenous factor threatening the success of the HDO initiative is political favouritism. Albania, not unlike many countries bordering on the Mediterranean, has a long history of clientalism. In his classic study titled *Friends of Friends*, the anthropologist Boissevain (1974) notes about the region that ‘who you know’ and which party or clan one is affiliated to can make all the difference to one’s life-chances... at least when one’s party is in power! Despite efforts to install meritocracy in reformed Albania, several interviewees noted that political patronage was still a powerful force, to the detriment of several initiatives, including the HDO one. Directors at central and regional levels, and even Principals, were appointed for political reasons, and as a result, key people who had received training in the MNLO approach, and who had made a commitment to the project, were suddenly removed from office, irrespective of their competence and experience, and others appointed in their stead.

Several examples of the damage done by appointments based on what was referred to, with a wink and a nudge, as the “amico-amico” system were observed during the field visit. One Principal received notification that she was being removed one day before we visited her school. She had been involved in the HDO project for three years, was considered a key driver of the initiative in her region, and was clearly much appreciated by the DoE Association, by her teachers, and by the community. Another Principal, also involved in the HDO project, told us that “Frankly speaking, I am expecting to be changed. So much investment has been made in me, and I have received so much training... but with the new Principal it will have to start from scratch.” Similarly, another Director sadly noted that he too had been called in by the Ministry and asked to “move on”. He felt that not only do “things

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<sup>38</sup> It is important to point out that it was not only the HDO initiative that was victim to the Ministry’s prevarication. Several documents perused in the course of writing this report in fact show clearly that many other projects in Albania—including the Global Education initiative—have suffered from the lack of managerial capacity on the part of the Ministry, and from the inability to own and follow through initiatives. A World Bank document, for instance, notes that one of the reasons explaining the failure of the EMIS—a tool that is sorely needed to allow a genuine across-the-board effort for EFA to be tracked—was the lack of ownership of the Ministry, who were supposed to develop and implement it.

<sup>39</sup> A department has now been set up at the MoES in order to co-ordinate donor input.

go back to zero with these changes”, but worse: people start hesitating before investing so much of themselves in a project. Needless to say, the lack of continuity, and the loss of key people, can have both demoralising and devastating effects on any initiative.

## Extrinsic motivation

Another difficulty that HDO project leaders had to contend with was the expectation, on the part of staff—be they recently appointed teachers, inspectors, regional directors, or high-ranking Ministry officials—to be paid extra for work which in most countries would be considered part and parcel of their regular duties. Staff even expected to be paid to attend training, and to change practices linked to teacher monitoring and evaluation, to school management, and to class-based teaching and assessment—even when they saw that the ways being proposed within the logic of the initiative were likely to lead to more effective results and higher learning achievement. Anecdotes were freely recounted in the course of the fieldwork of staff hanging on to several projects at the same time in order to increase their salary supplement, and consequently, of jealousies that developed between colleagues—at school and directorate levels—when some managed to get themselves on board many projects, while others on a few or on none at all. Teachers who had initially been prepared to put in extra work without an eye on material rewards—such as those who co-ordinated peer tutoring initiatives—were now asking for an extra allowance. When the DoE Association organised training for teachers, and only offered a modest per diem to cover travel, food and accommodation expenses, a delegation went up to Llambiri asking for a salary supplement, saying “These are hard, capitalist times... we are no longer under the communists, when we had to ‘volunteer’ to do things... We want to get paid more if we are to work more!”

Such expectations for remuneration for work that, strictly speaking, is already covered by a salary can be traced back to two related sources. One is the low wage given to teachers,

which makes them among the poorest of public servants in Albania. The other is the fact that, as one interviewee noted, “the country was trendy with donors at one stage, and there were so many of them with such large budgets which they had to spend, that they started paying teachers extra for attending courses or for taking part in projects ... and they felt justified doing this because of the poverty most of them were living in... But that ended up ‘poisoning’ teachers... They now feel they have a right to extra money every time they are asked to do something more, or to do something differently.”

Teachers may in fact be drawn to educational change for different reasons. As Marsh (1997) has observed, system-managers can try to get teachers on board the educational change bandwagon through ‘power-coercive’ strategies, through ‘normative/re-educative’ strategies, and/or through ‘empirical-rational’ strategies. The first is based on the control of rewards and punishments, the second refers to actions intended to influence teachers to see the situation differently, while the third concerns strategies that rely upon the recipients realising that they should adopt the innovation in their best interests. It is clear that in the HDO project, the rationale driving change was based on the second and third strategy, with major efforts being invested to first of all help educators acknowledge the HDO phenomenon and to account for it by challenging their own practices, and secondly to appeal to what Llambiri liked to call “the inner voice”—i.e. the intrinsic motivation that educators ought to have in order to work in the best interests of those in their care. Given the context, however, the DoE Association has had to compromise, and has ended up offering a supplementary stipend to teachers and trainers, for instance. It has done so in line with its commitment to outcomes- and performance-based principles: participants have to sit for a test, and only those who attain a pre-established standard are in fact paid the full supplement. All in all, however, such practices may have serious implications for the financial sustainability of any project on the ground in Albania.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> The increases in teachers’ salaries might reduce claims for supplementary payments, especially if higher wages are pegged to a clear articulation of what constitute core teacher duties.

# Conclusions and way forward

In this report I have striven to present a detailed, analytic and evaluative account of a home-grown response to a widespread but hitherto unacknowledged phenomenon in Albanian schools. In doing so, I have attempted to do justice to the vision, commitment and sheer tenacity of a non-governmental organisation—the ‘Development of Education’ Association—which, with the strategic support of UNICEF, has not only given national visibility to an issue that lies at the heart of EFA aspirations, but has come up with a connected set of initiatives that, at minimal cost, help address some of the more critical weaknesses of educational practice and management in Albanian schools and classrooms. We have described an incrementally piloted project that, based on the central premise that what matters most is learning achievement by all pupils, challenged a system steeped in an input-based mentality to reform itself with a view to ensuring more equitable learning outcomes, particularly for those at-risk.

To reach such goals, teachers were invited to reconceptualise the programme of studies in terms of learning objectives, and to make sure that no child was left behind by constantly monitoring mastery through the use of simple but effective mini-tests, and by moving away from a one-size-fits-all attitude to teaching and learning to one that took more into account the different needs of individual pupils. Principals were encouraged to make learning outcomes the focus of school development, with the annual school plan becoming the key tool and methodology to establish clear and attainable objectives that could be measured and even benchmarked against other schools. Students

were enrolled in peer-to-peer learning schemes that reached out to the less achieving pupils. In the best of cases, changes in practice brought about—and were supported by—changes in the culture of the pilot schools: teachers became more willing to work together and to learn from each other; Principals and inspectors were increasingly seen as allies in the search for effective learning outcomes for all, rather than as feared evaluators; and schools opened up to the community, recruiting adult volunteers to ensure that no student left school without the basic skills. All of this required a massive capacity-building effort, sustained by a very effective use of supporting literature, manuals and training programmes that helped enhance the professional standards of Principals and teachers.<sup>41</sup>

Despite such achievements, the present account also highlights challenges that the project has to face up to in order to reach its goals more effectively. Recommendations for the future and for the way forward flow naturally from a consideration of these difficulties. More specific recommendations can be made to the key partners in the HDO initiative, namely the MoES and its National Training and Qualifications Centre, the DoE Association, and UNICEF, and these recommendations are represented schematically in Annex 1. Some of these challenges are internal to the initiative itself: ways should be found, for instance, to ensure a better understanding of the concept of learning objectives on the part of teachers, and to develop improved skills in using mini-testing strategies appropriately. Attention should be given to the propensity for the MNLO approach to encourage a fragmented approach

<sup>41</sup> Such capacity building has had multiplier effects on other initiatives. Staff trained in the HDO project have made an important input in the ‘Second Chance’ initiative, a government programme for children who drop out of school before terminating their compulsory education. The initiative offers such children the opportunity to finish compulsory schooling by following at a reduced programme of studies on a part-time basis.

to the curriculum, when it is nowadays clear that integrated programmes that connect knowledge and structure it around powerful ideas promote understanding, recall and application more effectively. Most importantly, every effort should be made to train teachers to use interactive, child-centred teaching methods which, while implicitly promoted by the MNLO approach, have not been adopted to the extent that one would have hoped for in classes piloting the initiative.

Serious consideration should be given to a number of unintended consequences of aspects of the project. The term ‘hidden drop-out’, while catchy and effective in drawing attention to the phenomenon, can easily serve to stigmatise students, unwittingly disheartening weak pupils by entrenching the label ‘failure’ more deeply in their perception of themselves and in the process of constructing their self-identity. The preoccupation with benchmarking learning outcomes across classes and schools, while principled and driven by a sincere concern for pupils and the rights of the community to transparency, could be similarly counterproductive, leading to the unfair stigmatisation of teachers and schools and thus provoking resentment and demotivation. The issue therefore needs to be tackled with tact, with sensitivity to the real constraints that teachers have to work with, and with a deeper understanding of the relative weight of school intake and of school effects in determining achievement.

The HDO project is now at a critical stage, and a decision has to be made about going beyond the piloting phase to one that is more national in scope. Despite the challenges that the project has to overcome, and which have been carefully outlined in this report, there is little doubt in the present author’s mind that the initiative has grown strong roots in educational communities in the country, and that it has developed the breadth of vision, the effective tools, and the legitimacy and credibility that any project aspiring to go to scale must have. As importantly, the HDO initiative has shown that it is sufficiently well-conceived as to

promote ‘multiplier effects’—in other words, it has the ability to vehicle with it the paradigm shift that is much talked about in Albania, and to help bring about a radical change in outlook that will have an impact on the way educational communities go about their work. That, for any Ministry of Education, should be the test by means of which a budding initiative has to be evaluated. UNICEF too has gained much experience in supporting the piloting of the initiative, and has much to offer in ensuring that this knowledge is applied in deepening the impact of the project in the pilot schools, and taking it to other regions across the country, and beyond<sup>42</sup>. As we have noted, however, the project has yet to earn the whole-hearted, enthusiastic support of the MoES. No project can go to scale without the State’s backing and the State’s resources. In a country such as Albania, it is the State that, with the strategic help of its international partners, has the capacity to sustain a fledgling initiative that has proven itself, but which now requires major investment so that training programmes can be implemented, and practices that have been piloted in a few schools replicated across all the regions—particularly the poorer and more remote ones. This is particularly important given the fact that Albania is one of 25 countries selected in the framework of the EFA-Fast Track initiative. World Bank support will have pivotal influence here, but vigorous State support in improving, deepening and extending the principles underlying the HDO initiative would certainly assist the government face the major challenges of MDG 2 and EFA-FTI implementation, which are crucial and critical issues for Albanian education in the next decade.

As with most innovations, it is this critical stage—when the baton is passed on from civil society to the State—that determines whether a promising initiative will have the staying power to ‘permanently’ affect the course of education in a country. In this regard, the words of an interviewee from Korçë provide a fitting conclusion to this review: “The HDO project has put the finger on the wound, and has found the medicine too! It is now up to us.”

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<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that interest in the HDO initiative and its results has been expressed by several countries in the region. Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Macedonia, and Serbia are among those countries that have looked to the HDO project in an attempt to address problems that are similar to the ones that Albania has to face, and have asked for detailed information about methodologies and practices used for HDO prevention and reduction.

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# Specific recommendations

ANNEX

# 1

## Recommendations aimed at the Ministry of Education and Science

- The MoES is now the key actor that can ensure success in going to scale with the HDO initiative. It should therefore show unequivocal support for the principles underpinning the project and the strategies developed to implement them by owning the set of experiences and techniques that have been developed, by enriching the methodologies that have been trialled out, and by extending the project across all Grades and all curricular areas. It should also strive to do its best to provide the required human and financial resources, and to factor in the HDO dilemma in its strategic planning.
  - The MoES should now take the lead, through its National Training and Qualifications Centre, in providing comprehensive training for Principals and teachers and in extending capacity-building to a national scale in order to ensure the availability of a critical mass of change agents. The Centre has a pivotal role to play in integrating the HDO initiative in its national plan, in collecting and disseminating examples of good practice, in ensuring that resources are more readily available to facilitate the shift to learner-centred teaching,
  - In a context of scarce resources, it is essential for the MoES to make the best use possible of what is available. It now has a well articulated vision for the compulsory education sector. It is important that the different initiatives being piloted to implement goals work together rather than in parallel in order to ensure greater cumulative effectiveness and more efficient use of resources.
- The MoES should strive to ensure continuity in project implementation through the appointment of appropriate people on the basis of their professional competence, and not their political allegiances.
  - Whole-school approaches are likely to be more effective in implementing the changes that are being targeted, and in going to scale with the HDO project, the MoES needs to keep the whole ecology of the school needs firmly in mind so as to avoid discontinuities of practice within the same organisation.
  - There should be a clear articulation of what constitute core teacher duties, in order to avoid the current situation where many teachers and school administrators are unwilling to go what they would consider to be the 'extra mile' unless they receive extra incentives and remuneration.

## Recommendations aimed at the 'Education for Development' Association

- The Association should remain an active partner in the going-to-scale phase, providing its experience, technical assistance and know-how, and drawing on its network of trained staff to help the MoES and the National Training and Qualifications Centre in the challenge of institutionalising the pilot initiative. It is certainly not advisable for it to disengage at this stage.
- The Association should also invest its energies and resources in further developing the tools and strategies it has promoted through the HDO project. In particular, it should strive to develop more innovative and

effective ways of training teachers in the use of MNLO's, mini-tests, and differentiated teaching methods, and to refine the use of peer-learning strategies.

- More attention should be given to the ensuring that the MNLO approach does not lead to a fragmented approach to knowledge, but that rather the approach to the curriculum becomes more holistic, given that networks of connected knowledge structured around powerful ideas are more likely to be understood, remembered and used in new situations than are disconnected bits of information.
- While the Association should persist in its emphasis on an outcome-based approach to educational management and change, it should strive to find a happy medium between ensuring transparency and accountability on the one hand, while on the other acknowledging that 'school effects' cannot ever hope to completely address injustices that have their origins elsewhere, i.e. in the way resources, power and life-chances are allocated and distributed in Albanian society. In this regard, therefore, it should reconsider its strategy for publicly comparing the results attained by different schools. It should also guard more effectively against the use of labels that end up stigmatising schools and individual students.
- Given the importance that the revitalisation of teaching methods has been given in the National Education Strategy, it is critical for the HDO initiative to ensure that its goals, and the means to achieve those goals, work in the direction both of national aspirations, and in the direction of enlightened primary education. The DoE Association should therefore strive to ensure that the HDO project does serve more effectively as a vehicle for learner-centred, interactive pedagogies by, for instance, working more closely with other associations and NGO's, as well as with the National Training and Qualifications Centre.

## Recommendations aimed at UNICEF

- UNICEF has an important part to play in supporting the going-to-scale process. It has gained much experience in supporting the piloting of the initiative, and has much to offer in ensuring that this knowledge is applied in deepening the impact of the project in the pilot schools, and taking it to other regions across the country, and beyond. It is critical that such support is not withdrawn at this stage.
- As the project goes to scale, with other organizations—such as the World Bank—investing in the effort that this process represents, it is important that there is a good synergy between the MoES, the DoE Association, and new partners in the initiative. UNICEF, with its nation-wide and international networks, can contribute to the formation and consolidation of strong and productive partnerships so that the education reform strategy remains on track.
- UNICEF should draw on its international experience in the promotion of student-centred, joyful forms of learning in order to consolidate the pedagogies underpinning the MNLO approach promoted by the HDO initiative. It should also support the National Training and Qualifications Centre in the development of new methods and educational materials that promote interactive, learner-centred pedagogies.
- UNICEF can use its influence to ensure that competent people involved with the project remain engaged, despite changes in the wider political sphere, thus ensuring continuity of purpose and enduring motivation on the part of educational leaders and staff.
- Finally, given UNICEF's mandate, it is critical for the organization to continue supporting the Albanian government in facing the major challenges of MDG 2 and EFA-FTI implementation, particularly through investing its resources in the embedding of the HDO initiative in the poorer and more remote areas in the country.

# Semi-structured interview schedules

## ANNEX 2

*[These were questions prepared on the basis of preliminary reading. Other questions addressing more specific issues were added on the basis of new sensitising concepts and the cumulative knowledge acquired of the project]*

### *... with Principals and deputy Principals*

1. Tell us the way your school became involved with the HDO project?
2. What were the positive things that attracted you to the project?
3. Did you have any particular apprehensions?
4. What is your overall assessment of the HDO project?
5. What changes, if any, has it brought to your school?
6. Compared to other projects you / your school has been involved in, what are the strong and weak points of the HDO project?
7. Has the Hidden Drop-Out term tended to serve as a label to stigmatise pupils?
8. What impact has it had, if any at all, on management issues in the school (e.g. Annual School Plan)?
9. Can you please show us your Annual School Plan? How was this developed? How is this different, if at all, from the way you used to write up the plan before involvement with the HDO project?
10. Has it had any impact on teachers? Which?
11. Has it had any specific impact on pedagogical practices in the classroom?
12. Has it had any specific impact on assessment practices in the classroom?
13. What are your views of the peer tutoring programmes associated with the HDO project?
14. If other countries had to adopt the MNLO approach, what advice would you give them?
15. What implications does the HDO project have for teacher inspection?
16. Has the project had any impact on teacher relations in the school?
17. How do you feel about the notion of making class test scores public? About comparing them with those of other schools?
18. Has the HDO project involved the school in any additional costs? How were these covered? Can the MNLO approach be maintained without external funding?
19. Has there been an ink-blot effect? Does the MNLO approach spread to other subjects? To other Grades?
20. If you had to compare the HDO project with an animal, which one would you pick? Why?

### *... with Teachers*

1. How did you become involved in the HDO project?
2. Can you recall for us your initial reactions to it?
3. What are the key features and the key messages of the HDO project?
4. How do you feel about the central messages of the project regarding hidden drop-outs?
5. Do you agree about the responsibilities that the teacher and the school have in this regard?

6. Compared to other projects that you have been involved in, what are the key strengths and key weaknesses of the HDO project?
7. What training opportunities did the project offer you? How do you feel about that training?
8. In what ways has the MNLO approach made a difference in the way you go about your work in class?
9. Tell us how you plan for achieving the MNLO per chapter.
10. What are your thoughts about mini-tests?
11. What were the key challenges and key obstacles in implementing the MNLO approach?
12. What do you feel you need in order to better implement the approach?
13. Do you find the textbooks you use helpful in implementing the MNLO approach? How? Why?
14. How would a teacher training in the MNLO approach be different from a teacher who was not?
15. To what extent do you feel you have been able to engage all the students in learning?
16. Can you please show us some of your critical self-evaluation notes in your diary?
17. Some have told us that the MNLO approach has encouraged teachers to work together with teachers of parallel Grades. To what extent is this true for you?
18. What are your views of the peer tutoring programmes associated with the HDO project?
19. Do you feel that the HDO project tends to label weak students, thus discouraging them?
20. How do you feel about the notion of making class test scores public? About comparing them with those of parallel classes in your schools / in other schools?

**... with Student-Tutors involved in Peer Tutoring Programmes**

1. How did you get involved in the patronage programme?
2. Tell us about your experiences in this programme?
3. What were some of the difficulties that you encountered?
4. Tell us some of the things that happened and which you recall with happiness? ... that you recall with sadness or concern.

5. How did your parents react to the news that you were going to be involved in peer tutoring?
6. Did the school help you in any way in the efforts you made to tutor other pupils?
7. Can you explain in detail what you did with the students you tutored?
8. Did your involvement have any effect on your friendships with your own classmates? ...with the tutees?
9. If we had to start this programme in another school, what advice would you give so that it would be more successful?
10. If you had to compare the patronage system with an animal, which one would you pick? Why?

**...with Student-Tutees involved in the Peer Tutoring Programme**

1. How did you become involved in the patronage programme?
2. How did you feel when you were chosen to be one of the tutees?
3. What were your parents' reactions?
4. Tell us how when and where you used to meet your peer tutor, and what s/he did.
5. Tell us some of the nice things that happened during the tutoring sessions.
6. Did anything happen during the sessions that upset you in any way?
7. Do you feel you made progress in reading with your tutor? Why do you think this happened?
8. Were there things that you felt better about when learning with your peer tutor than with learning in the class as usual? Tell us more about that...
9. If we had to start this peer tutoring project in another school, what advice would you give us so that we would do it better?
10. If you had to compare the patronage system with an animal, which one would you pick? Why?

**Question bank drawn upon when interviewing DoE Association staff, UNICEF staff, MoES officials, Regional Education Directors, Inspectors, staff from NGO's, from Universities, and other organisations...**

1. Can you please give us details of the main development phases of the HDO project?

2. What are the main features of the challenges facing education in Albania, and how does the HDO project connect with / respond to them?
3. To what key problems is the HDO project meant to be an answer?
4. What are the main features of the HDO project? What are its main tools and strategies?
5. Given your knowledge of / experience in other education initiatives, how does HDO compare? What are its main strengths? What are its main weaknesses?
6. What impact do you feel that the HDO project has made at a national level?
7. What would your main indicators of success for the project be? What do we know about the project's impact on increasing learning achievement, and on reducing hidden drop-outs?
8. To what extent was staff development and training a central feature of the project?
9. How did teachers / principals / parents / the community react to the HDO project?
10. To what extent has the MoES been involved in / supportive of the project? How?
11. How powerful do you feel that the project has been as a vehicle for educational change? How has the project changed practices in schools? ... In classrooms?
12. Some of the problematic aspects mentioned in relation to the MNLO approach are the following... Can you please comment on as many of these as you can?
  - the hidden drop-out label can have a stigmatising effect
  - the MNLO is a difficult concept to assimilate and to integrate in their classroom practice.
  - the MNLO approach is fragmentary rather than holistic
  - the peer tutoring programmes were opposed by some parents
  - there is a lack of linkage between the MNLO approach and other aspects of educational reform in Albania (e.g. textbooks, curriculum)
  - the piloting has been done in some of the better schools rather than where the HDO phenomenon is most prevalent
  - the MNLO approach has led to an obsession with testing
  - the MNLO approach has not really made a difference to the ways teachers teach in the classroom
13. To what extent is the HDO project linked to other education reform initiatives in the country?
14. What are the most successful aspects of the project? ... the most problematic?
15. What has the role of UNICEF been in the project?
16. Are there any comments you would like to make about the financial aspects of the project? (donor assistance, community financing, cost effectiveness, sustainability...)
17. What do you think are the next steps in the project?
18. To what extent can the MNLO approach spread across subjects, and across Grades? Should it?
19. What problems do you foresee in going to scale?
20. If another country had to adopt the HDO project, what advice would you give it, given your experience with the project in Albania? What are the lessons learnt?







